スレイヤーズすぺしゃる㉕

騎士道のススメ

神坂　一

イラスト　あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 25
Recommendations of chivalry!

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White Night Beast [Part 1]

Between the gaps in the mountains, a small village came into view just as snow began to mix into the blowing wind. By the time I arrived, the villagers had likely long since retreated into their homes; there wasn't a soul to be seen on the streets. Nevertheless, I found a small inn and stepped through the door.

A doorbell chimed. The proprietress, who had been cleaning, took one look at me and screamed.

"What did you come here for!?"

"Eeeeeeek!"

I instinctively shouted back.

"Ah! I mean, really! Coming to an inn only to be asked 'what did you come here for' is a bit much! I just happened to stop by and thought I'd stay the night!"

".....Just happened, you saaaaaay.....?"

She tilted her head and directed a wet, lingering gaze of suspicion at me, as if licking me with her eyes.

"No, really, it was just by chance!"

I desperately tried to explain myself. I didn't quite understand why I had to be making excuses like this, but...

As was common with this type of inn, the first floor doubled as a dining hall. Standing in the corner of that room was a boy of about seven or eight, staring fixedly at me with a dark, gloomy expression. The moment I noticed him, he dashed away!

He's wary of me too? My instincts told me this situation was bad, though I didn't know why, so I piled on more words.

"Look! It's starting to snow! It would be a little tough to push on to the next town or village in this!"

The woman remained silent for a while, looking me up and down. She was a black-haired beauty, but her sharp, doubt-filled eyes and dowdy clothing ruined the effect. After staring at me for a good long while, she spoke.

".....Could it be..... you're just a customer?"

".....Well, yeah, I am....."

"Then why were you hiding the fact that you're a normal customer?"

"Hah. Hah. Hah. Hah."

I could feel the area around my temple twitching. I wanted to scream, "Like I'd stay in a place like this!" and storm out, but given the scale of this village, I doubted there was another inn. On the other hand, I had no desire to head for another town or village in the falling snow.

I managed to suppress my anger and spoke as if explaining to a child.

"I mean, you started cross-examining me before I could even say a word."

"Mmm. When you put it that way, it makes it sound like I'm the one in the wrong."

You ARE in the wrong, you idiot.

Just as my patience reached its absolute limit—

".....If you are a normal guest..... then welcome! ♡"

The proprietress's attitude flipped completely. The moment a beaming smile spread across her face, she seemed to grow younger all at once. She could have passed for someone in her early twenties.

"Welcome to Takia Village! ♪ We don't have much here, but please make yourself at home. The snow outside must have been awful, wasn't it?"

".....Ah. Well....."

While I was bewildered by her extreme transformation, the boy from before came running back.

"Yay! A guest!"

I suppose it was true that country folk were often wary of outsiders. And there I was, in a black cloak and black bandana, with a shoulder guard adorned with gemstone talismans. With a short sword at my hip, I did look imposing in a way.

A city dweller would have recognized me as a traveling mage, but in a village like this, far off the main highway, I probably looked suspicious as hell. Still, this level of guardedness was bizarre. The fact that there was an inn at all suggested that travelers weren't entirely unheard of.

"Hey, hey. Tell me stories about your travels!"

"Cheh."

"Now, now, Monoru. Let the guest relax first."

"I'm sorry, traveler. This child just loves travelers. Tee-hee."

.....From his initial attitude, it certainly didn't look that way.....

".....Well..... for now... is it okay if I stay for one night?"

"Of course! ♡ Don't stop at one night—stay for two or three! But perhaps a place with nothing like this is just boring for a traveler?"

When she said that, I suddenly remembered something I had heard in a town on the way here. As I signed the guest register as "Lina Inverse," I spoke up.

"I heard you can get a delicious mushroom hot pot around here."

"It's just a simple country stew. But it'll warm your body, so I'll serve it to you tonight if you'd like. ♡"

"I'd love that. Oh, and by the way, I heard there's a bit of an unusual festival or event around here—"

Suddenly, the air turned cold.

"What are you really after!?"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!"

The proprietress let out a voice full of resentment, causing me to yelp again. She began to leak a dark, murky aura, and the child also began to edge away with a gloomy expression.

"No, I mean, I just happened to overhear a rumor like that, and I thought it might not even be about this village—"

"Is that so!?"

When I hurriedly tried to excuse myself, she brightened up again.

"Is that so? I'm sure there are many unusual events in various places. Well, someone like me who has lived in the countryside forever wouldn't know much about that. ♡"

"Hey, hey, big sister! If you're free after dinner, tell me stories about your travels!"

".....Ah..... for now..... anyway..... could you just show me to my room?"

Feeling utterly exhausted, I said it with no strength left in my voice. The child, who had just dashed away with a dark face, ran up with an innocent, bright smile.

Is that your acting style too!?

The meal served for dinner was excellent. With the Jidori soup simmering, I dipped various thinly sliced mushrooms into the pot, took a breath, and had a bite. Because they were sliced thin, they cooked through perfectly, but since they were only dipped in the broth, the individual fragrance of each mushroom stood out.

Mmm. The delicate flavor is quite 'delicious'.

"Um, seconds on the Jidori thigh meat!"

"Yes, yes. Please, eat your fill. ♡"

"Mom, I'm hungry too!"

Amidst the seemingly harmonious atmosphere, I felt a slight sense of unease. The reason, of course, went without saying: it was the sudden, episodic transformations of the mother and child.

However, I could at least imagine the reason. When I checked in, they had reacted to my words about an "unusual event."

In other words, there was a peculiar tradition here, and it was likely taboo for anyone outside the village to know about it. That was a fairly common story when it came to events with a religious tinge. Still, it was impossible to keep a secret perfectly forever. Fragments of the event's existence must have spread to other villages or towns—and that's how it reached my ears.

Basically, as long as I was careful not to touch upon that subject, I could spend my time here normally.

...Though, I was a bit curious.

"Um, seconds on the vegetables too!"

"Oh my. You certainly were hungry, weren't you? ♡"

Just as the proprietress brought over a plate piled with vegetables—for what felt like the umpteenth time—the doorbell rang. The lamp glowing in the inn's dining hall dimly illuminated the figure at the entrance.

Outside, the snow was growing heavier.

The air completely froze.

"Go away—!"

The boy—Monoru—suddenly shrieked. But the man at the doorway remained unfazed.

"I can't do that. I've come here to investigate. Or would you prefer I spread the word in the neighboring villages and towns that I was chased away when I tried to conduct an investigation?"

".....I have no idea what you're talking about....."

The proprietress tried to play dumb, but her face was as white as a sheet.

"We are full for tonight."

"It doesn't look that way—"

The man scanned the room. Aside from me, the proprietress, and Monoru, there was no one else. Telling him the place was full was a tough sell.

"If the lady of the house says so, fine; I shall believe it. In that case, let me sleep in a corner of the dining hall or a storehouse. I'll pay the full regular rate. Surely you won't refuse that and tell me to go outside and freeze to death? That would make you a murderer."

"——No——"

Being called a murderer forced the proprietress to back down. Even as she glared at the man with a look that was truly murderous, her tone remained quiet.

".....Understood. If it's just one person, I suppose I can manage a room."

The man stepped sluggishly through the doorway, his silhouette finally becoming clear. Standing against the backdrop of the dark, snowy night was a single man.

"Who goooooes there!?"

The proprietress went berserk again. The male guest didn't panic or flinch—on the contrary, a thin smile played on his lips.

"Ho. Such a panic. It seems the legend of the Rabazu isn't a mere fabrication after all."

Behind the man, another shadow emerged.

"Make that two people."

Following him inside was—long black hair, a black cloak, a skull necklace, and clothes with a pointlessly high level of skin exposure! Naga the White Serpent, my self-proclaimed rival, walked in huddling her body and shivering violently.

...If she was that cold, the woman should have just worn proper clothes.

".....And that... unfortunate person.....?"

The proprietress asked with genuine pity, momentarily forgetting her hostility toward the man.

"I hired her as a guard, but....."

The man gave Naga a complicated look.

"Li-li-li-li-Lina!"

"Don't sleep! You'll die if you sleep!"

The man frantically slapped Naga, who was on the verge of slipping into a coma. He should have just left her be. While that heartwarming scene unfolded—

The proprietress turned slowly toward me.

"Are you... perhaps... acquaintances?"

".....Well..... yeah..... sort of....."

For the time being, the dinner I had been looking forward to was ruined.

"I am actually with the Mages' Guild in the town of Radum. My name is Archie Mezwood."

The gloomy man introduced himself while sitting at my table and picking at my mushroom hot pot for some reason. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. Lanky with black hair and narrow eyes, he didn't exactly have a friendly face. He wore a black robe and a black cloak. *Wait, is this guy a mage too?*

Naga sat next to him and, naturally, also started poking at my hot pot. There were so many things I wanted to snap at them for—but what concerned me most was the presence of the proprietress and Monoru standing behind me.

I felt them. I felt their presence *very* strongly.

It was a mix of hostility, bloodlust, or perhaps a pure will to destroy. I could feel it radiating from behind me. My hair was practically standing on end. *Father, Mother, Sis... please forgive your daughter for leaving this world before you.* That was the kind of vibe I was getting.

They were likely glaring past my shoulder at Naga and Mezwood, but the two of them were completely unbothered. Naga was a creature who never cared about others' opinions anyway, but Mezwood didn't care either as he continued.

"I must say, meeting the famous Lina Inverse in a place like this is a good omen. I'm certain this means the search for the Rabazu will go well."

The moment the mysterious word "Rabazu" was uttered, the destructive will looming behind me swelled. Naga finally noticed me then and raised her voice.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! What a coincidence!"

"Do you know of the Rabazu?"

Mezwood asked me insensitively. I forced a twitchy smile.

"Rather than that, this mushroom hot pot is delicious. I recommend the ones with the pink and green speckled pattern that the proprietress brought out after you sat down."

For some reason, no one else had touched those. Ignoring my recommendation, Mezwood pressed on.

"You don't know? Hardly surprising. It's a monster from the local legends. They say it appears only on certain winter nights to bite people. The interesting part is that the one bitten isn't harmed; on the contrary, they are said to be visited by great fortune."

"I am a naturalist with the Mages' Guild. I study and classify the nature of various creatures, and I came here after hearing of the Rabazu. I thought it might be an undiscovered species. If I discover a new species, it could leave my name for posterity. So, how about it? Care to have a hand in this?"

It sounded like an interesting story, but honestly, I was terrified of what was behind me. To say I wasn't curious would be a lie, but I didn't want to provoke the people at my back.

"No such thing exists!"

Eek!

The proprietress and Monoru shouted in unison right behind me, making me jump. I was too scared to turn around. Amidst this pressure that felt almost like a miasma, Mezwood ignored them and continued.

"I've never actually met a demon, but they say pure demons don't have a fixed form. I hear you and Naga here have encountered such beings."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga let out her trademark idiotic laugh while huffing over the hot pot. Well, we *had* encountered them...

"That story might just be a legend or an old folk tale, but last year, someone supposedly saw something like it near this village."

"I-I mean... I... Well, you probably don't need so many guards anyway. Even if it is an unconfirmed animal, there's no guarantee it's like the legends. It might not be safe. And potentially—"

He lowered his voice.

"—it might not be an animal at all, but a demon."

Even with his voice lowered, the only other sound in the room was the bubbling of the stew. Everyone heard him.

"but I just know if it is really true! Did it really appear here?!"

Mezwood stood up excitedly, his eyes darting toward the dark, snowy night behind the village chief. But of course, nothing was visible out there. Or was it? Was that really just the sound of the wind? All I could hear was the distant howling of the gale.

"Lady Naga! We're going!"

"Mmf, mmm, grmph!"

Naga let out a muffled groan of protest with her mouth full of hot pot.

"I don't care. Either way, if you prioritize the pot over the job, I'll have to reduce your fee."

Reluctantly, Naga stood up. Mezwood looked at me, but I cut him off before he could speak.

"I'll pass. I don't remember accepting any job. Besides, you don't have time to try and persuade me here, right?"

Giving up, Mezwood left with Naga without saying another word.

"With two people strong enough to repel demons, it's like giving a club to an ogre... or a blade to a madman—"

"——Wait just a minute—"

Interrupting my retort, an old man burst through the door.

"Fisir! Just now—"

He froze instantly upon noticing there were guests. The silence was filled only by the fading ring of the doorbell and the sound of the pot simmering.

"Wh-What's the matter, Chief?"

The one who broke the silence was the proprietress standing behind me. So, Fisir was her name. The old man—the Chief—looked back and forth between her and me with a troubled face.

"Did a Rabazu show up or something?"

At Mezwood's half-joking question—

"!"

The Chief gasped so audibly it couldn't have been more obvious. Even Mezwood was surprised by the reaction.

".....Is she... not going?"

Before I knew it, the chief, had circled around and was asking me from the side. I gave him a small smile.

"There's some reason you don't want people touching this, right? I just figured I'd leave it alone."

I meant that I didn't want to touch a sore spot and get dragged into a mess, but—

".....It seems... I have misunderstood you."

The one who stepped in front of me was the proprietress.

"Since I heard you were an acquaintance of those people, I assumed... but it seems you are someone trustworthy. Oh."

As if suddenly remembering, she took the plate of speckled mushrooms from the table.

"I'll set these dangerous things aside."

They WERE dangerous!

She moved past the Chief, who was still standing dazed at the doorway.

"Please! Without asking any questions... could you help the 'Rabazu'!?"

"Huh?"

I let out a confused sound. That meant the proprietress knew the Rabazu actually existed.

"I'm begging you!"

"Please!"

Beside the bowing proprietress, Monoru also gave a deep bow.

"I ask this of you as well, traveler," said the Chief, who had finally regained his composure and walked over.

It was a situation where it was hard to say no, but of course, I *wanted* to say no. Wandering around in the freezing snow looking for some rare beast? I couldn't say that directly though.

"I mean, even if you tell me to protect it without asking questions... First of all, I don't even know what this... 'Rabazu'? ...looks like."

The Chief, the proprietress, and Monoru. The three of them exchanged glances and then shouted in unison:

"Please, do something!"

"Even if you say that..."

I frowned for a moment.

"I can at least lead those two who just ran out in a completely different direction."

"Please! We can't offer much, but we'll waive your room fee!"

There was a hint of desperation in the proprietress's voice.

Well, I guess I have no choice...

I stood up and headed toward the door.

"Chief. In which direction did you say you saw the Rabazu?"

"Didn’t you say you’d lead them in a different direction? ...Oh! East! It was the East!"

The Chief said, catching onto my intention. I started chanting a spell under my breath as I walked to the door. Basically, I would draw the other two over with a flashy attack spell and then lead them away, claiming the Rabazu had gone East.

I stepped through the inn's entrance.

And there it was. In the world covered in a thin layer of snow.

The light tore through the night, the heat vaporized the snow, and a roar shattered the silence! Once the afterglow of the strike faded, only the darkness, the falling white flakes, and the quiet reclaimed their dominance.

My heart was still pounding. It was there. Truly, right there.

It was standing not far from the inn's entrance. Because of the snow and the dark, I couldn't see its form clearly. All that entered my eyes was a hazy silhouette—a hunched back, a physique about two sizes larger than a normal human's. I could just barely make out that it had something like a tail. Before my spell could even impact, it kicked off the ground, leapt onto the roof of a nearby house, and vanished into the depths of the night.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"What was that just now!?"

The voices of Naga and Mezwood approached. When I came to my senses and looked around, other villagers were peeking out from their doors and windows, wondering what on earth had happened.

"The Rabazu was here. Right here."

"Here!?"

Were my lips trembling as I spoke because of the cold? I pointed to the East—the opposite direction from where the Rabazu had actually fled.

"It went that way. But it's useless to chase it. With human legs, you probably... couldn't catch up."

"Tch...! But this proves for certain that something is out there! This settles it; we'll stay put and do a thorough investigation..."

In the dining room on the first floor of the inn, only the sound of the stove fire popping occasionally echoed. There were six of us there now, including the Village Chief.

Naturally, the village had been in an uproar after I let loose that attack spell outside. The Chief had managed to calm everyone down and bring them into the inn, and that's where Mezwood's interrogation began.

"What kind of creature is it? If you know the details, tell me. What does the legend say? How much do the villagers know?" But no matter what he asked, the Chief remained silent. Realizing he wouldn't get an answer, Mezwood sighed and stopped talking—and then, the silence arrived.

Me, the Chief, Naga, and Mezwood sat at one table. At the next table were the proprietress and Monoru.

"I can at least tell you it fled," Mezwood's raspy voice echoed. "But why?"

It was about time for children to be in bed, but this wasn't the time for that.

"Come to think of it, Miss Lina, you saw it too. What did it look like?" Mezwood suddenly asked me.

The proprietress and the Chief shot me anxious glances. I hadn't told them I'd seen the real thing. Believing that I was lying to cover for them, they were now worried that my lie would be exposed. I let out a sigh.

".....I only saw a shadow..... it was a bit far off. But I didn't misidentify it, and it wasn't my imagination. Something was definitely there. It was about two sizes larger than a normal person, and when I fired my spell, it literally jumped."

At my testimony, Mezwood muttered half to himself, his excitement mounting.

"Hmm. A large beast with superior jumping power, then. If it were a demon, there would be no need to flee. I've heard stories of beasts coming to human settlements in winter when food runs out in the mountains, but is this another example of that? However, for a beast of that size to remain unseen until now... Is it nocturnal? Or does it live in a different sphere? Underground? Or perhaps in the trees—"

Thud.

The roof creaked slightly. At first, no one paid it any mind, assuming it was just snow sliding off.

.....*Creak, creak, creak, creak.*

At the sound of following footsteps, everyone looked up at the ceiling! This inn was two stories; the guest rooms were on the second floor, and the dining hall was on the first. The back was likely the family's living quarters. Above this dining hall, there were no guest rooms—just the roof.

"It's here," Mezwood whispered.

"Drawn by the smell of food, perhaps?"

The lingering scent of the mushroom hot pot still drifted through the room. That smell would have leaked outside through the chimney...

".....It's come for this child....."

The proprietress cradled Monoru, both of them staring at the ceiling. I reflexively looked at her because of the misplaced emotion in her voice. The look in the eyes of

the mother and son was the same. If it had been the color of terror, I wouldn't have thought twice. But the emotion leaking out was—

Expectation.

"It came to bite this child....." the proprietress continued.

"What—?"

Mezwood spun around as if stung by the sheer strangeness of her words. "What kind of nonsense are you talking about!?"

As if reacting to his raised voice, the ceiling gave a small *creak*.

"Hmph! Regardless of the opponent's goal! It's all the same once I've defeated it!"

Needless to say, it was Naga the White Serpent who stood up, flourishing her cloak! She immediately began to chant a spell—

"STOP IIIIIIIT!"

"...Wh-!?"

The one who screamed and lunged at Naga was Monoru, leaping from his mother's arms! Startled by the sudden tackle, Naga’s incantation was cut short. Monoru clung to her nonetheless.

"Stop it, stop it, stoooop iiiit!"

"Wha-! Hey! You! Wait a minute!"

"Monoru! Stop that! What are you doing to the guest! If you do that, something will—"

Naga looked up at the ceiling. The footsteps had stopped dead.

".....It's gone..... it seems."

Mezwood muttered, then turned his gaze to the Chief, who was still staring at the ceiling.

"Tell me. What on earth is that thing?"

".....That is....."

"God..... it is a God!" the Chief spat out grumpily.

Mezwood remained composed.

"Now see here, Chief, it's possible that what you believe to be a God is actually some kind of dangerous animal. Can you really just leave it be?"

"That is not the case!"

"How can you be so sure?"

"That is because... because it is a God.....!"

As the Chief turned away, Mezwood sighed.

".....This is going nowhere. I suppose from your perspective, it's unpleasant to have the thing you've worshipped denied its divinity. But in the unlikely event that I'm right and that thing hurts or kills someone in the village—"

"It won't do that!"

The one who let out a voice bordering on a scream was the innkeeper's son, Monoru.

Outside, the wind seemed to have picked up. The window shutters rattled with a small noise, and a wind like a distant moan could be heard.

".....Um..... a silence fell over the dining hall-slash-tavern on the first floor of the inn," I muttered pointlessly.

"A God... huh..."

Usually, when people said "God," they meant the Flare Dragon or the four Dragon Kings of Earth, Water, Fire, and Air. Obviously, one of those wouldn't be wandering around here like a stray.

"It's a common story in rural areas," Mezwood answered my mutterings nonchalantly. "People deify and keep their distance from animals that pose a threat or phenomena that can't be measured by common sense. In cases I know of, there are regions that worship snakes or ordinary dragons as gods."

"I've certainly heard of things like that, but..."

Next time on Slayers Special: "White Night Beast [Part 2]"

Because my hometown was in a snowy region, snow is like my "original scenery," you know? It's been imprinted on me. I end up making it snow in all sorts of scenes for no real reason. I like snow. Though for my parents, shoveling it was a pain... Wait—is this not the free talk corner?! Oh, come on. You should have told me sooner, Akita-chan! You're so mean. Well then, anyway! Next time: "White Night Beast" Part 2! Just you wait!

White Night Beast [Part 2]

Synopsis of the story so far:

In the snowy mountains, at a small inn in a tiny village, Lina meets a proprietress and her son who are acting suspiciously. Lina tries to avoid getting involved with the secretive pair, but the situation changes when the mage Mezwood and his hireling Naga arrive searching for the legendary cryptid "Rabazu." The Chief rushes in saying the Rabazu has appeared. The mother and son beg Lina to save it. And Lina herself spots a shadow in the snow. Inside the snow-bound inn, the mother claims the beast has come to bite her son, while the Chief declares it a God—

The Chief looked up at the ceiling and said in a hoarse voice— ".....Please..... do not lay a hand on it..... for that is..... a God....." He had blurted out something incredible.

"You're being rude!" the proprietress blurted out, frantically pulling Monoru away from Naga. He continued to flail.

Thud! The roof groaned again. Then, *snap*. The fire in the stove crackled, and the world regained its sound. Everyone exhaled at the same time.

Mezwood had essentially fled upstairs, unable to withstand the awkwardness.

"Well, I suppose there’s no point just sitting here. I’ll go rest in my room for now," he had said in a wooden, rehearsed tone, stretching unnaturally before scurrying up the stairs.

Monoru, with tears welling in his eyes, glared at where he had been. "He won't do that! Never!"

Even Mezwood seemed to find it awkward being made to cry by a child. He had looked troubled, stammering, "Er... ah, no... I didn't mean to speak ill of the Rabazu, I was just worried about everyone in the village..."

Monoru continued to death-glare Mezwood for a while longer before silently running back to his mother's side.

I suggested to Naga that she follow her client, but she didn't seem inclined to budge.

"He went upstairs, you know. Aren't you going to your room?"

She brushed back her hair. "Hmph. Just because he's the client doesn't mean I have to follow him every—"

"GYAAAAAAAAAH!"

A scream from the second floor cut her off.

"That was—!" I bolted upright. Naga stood as well.

"The Rabazu's cry?"

"That was Mezwood screaming, you idiot!"

By the time I finished my retort, I was already running. Naga was right beside me, followed by the proprietress, Monoru, and the Chief. Our boots creaked against the wooden stairs. Reaching the short hallway on the second floor, we found one of the doors flung wide open. We saw Mezwood's back as he sat on the floor, having fallen on his backside.

I rushed over and peered into the room over his shoulder.

A single lamp hung on the wall. Its wick was turned down low, casting a faint, flickering light that only dimly outlined the furniture. The front window was wide open, and the night wind blew in, bringing a light dusting of snow with it. Beyond the window lay only the winter darkness.

There was no longer any sign of anyone there.

"It... It appeared! It appeared!"

Mezwood stayed slumped at my feet, only his head moving as he turned a trembling gaze toward us.

"The window! The window was rattling! Then it suddenly flew open! And it... it...!"

"It appeared!?" Naga asked.

He nodded frantically. "I-I couldn't see it clearly, but it looked like a lizardman! When I cried out, it fled—it must still be nearby...!"

Though he was still shaking, he managed to stand up as he regained some modicum of composure.

"But... it couldn't have been a lizardman!"

He was right. Lizardmen lived much further south; they were notoriously weak to the cold. He looked at Naga.

"We can't just stand here! Lady Naga, let's go!"

".....I suppose we must....."

The two of them turned to head back down the stairs, but then—

"NUWAAAAAAAH!?"

The proprietress lunged and latched onto Mezwood's waist with a death grip!

"Wh-What!? What are you doing?!"

Mezwood struggled; the proprietress clung on. In the tangle of limbs, there was a loud **THUD** as they hit the floor. Neither moved for a moment.

".....Ugh....."

Eventually, Mezwood groaned and pushed himself up.

"Waaaaah! Mom!"

"You monster! How dare you hurt Fisir!"

Monoru and the Chief seized the moment to heap accusations upon him.

"N-No! Just now, she was clearly the one who jumped on me—!"

"Murderer!"

"Fiend!"

"Get out of our village!"

They had no intention of listening. The three of them—well, the third being the proprietress who was currently playing dead on the floor—continued to scream at him. In his panic, Mezwood didn't even notice the ruse.

"I-I don't know anything! It's not my fault! Argh! I don't have time for this! Come, Lady Naga!"

He grabbed Naga and scrambled down the stairs as if fleeing the scene. Shortly after, the doorbell chimed.

Silence.

"What are you just standing there for!?"

"Eeeeeeeeeek!"

The sudden, synchronized roar of the "dead" proprietress, the Chief, and Monoru made me jump back half a step. The aura they radiated was overwhelming.

"Wh-What do you mean, 'standing there'?"

"Now that you've said you'd do something, it's your mission to do it!"

"You will protect the Rabazu, won't you?"

"That's right, Sis! You have to go after those two before it's too late!"

They crowded me, all talking at once. I hadn't actually *promised* to protect the Rabazu, but the atmosphere made it impossible to say so.

"If I'm going to protect it, I need to know the details about the Rabazu!"

The moment I raised my voice, the three of them snapped their mouths shut.

"Asking me to protect something without telling me anything is like asking me to find a white black dog. It's impossible. If those two find the Rabazu before I do, there's nothing I can do. To prevent that, I need to know its nature and behavior patterns. I'm trying to help you here."

The three looked away in silence for a while. Then—

"Chief, at this point we have to..."

"Uhm..."

The proprietress and the Chief exchanged a nod.

"We shall have a mountain hunt ourselves and capture those two!"

"Wait a minute!"

I stopped their reckless plan and the Chief sighed, finally defeated.

"I'll keep the secret," I promised. "So, tell me everything."

The Chief began to speak in a quiet, resigned tone.

"It is said that the name 'Rabazu' is a corruption of the name of the Fire Dragon King, Vrabbazard... In this region where winter is harsh, people likely worshipped the god of fire. There is no formal church; over time, the name changed, the faith shifted into a tradition, and eventually—once a year, one villager is chosen to dress as the god Rabazu. They visit the houses and 'bite' the residents to grant a blessing. Those blessed are said to find happiness."

".....Then... that Rabazu is....."

At my murmur, the proprietress huddled over Monoru.

"It's Dad," Monoru whispered.

The mother and Chief gasped.

"Wait... you mean, your father...?"

Monoru looked down, his fists clenched. "That thing... it's Dad."

"M-Monoru!"

"What are you—!"

The two adults panicked, but the Chief eventually nodded.

"Two years ago, the role of Rabazu was given to Aeru—the master of this inn. He was thrilled. He had always loved performing; he even dreamed of being a traveling entertainer once. He put his heart into the costume, modifying it to make it look even more realistic..."

He looked at me with a pained expression.

"But that was the tragedy. On the day of the festival, Aeru became too immersed in the role. He... he turned wild."

"Wait a minute!"

"It's a common enough story," the Chief said.

"Like hell it is!"

Ignoring my retort, the Chief continued. "Since then, he has lived in the mountains, believing he is the Rabazu. He appears in the village during the festival season to bite people and then leaves. Someone must have seen him, and the rumor reached that Mezwood fellow's ears..."

"I see... so 'he' has actually been coming to this inn many times. That means somewhere, he might still have his human memories or feelings for his family."

The proprietress nodded tearfully.

"We tried to persuade him, to catch him," the Chief added. "But his physical abilities, honed by a life in the wild, are beyond us. We thought that if he saw his wife and child, he might regain his humanity, but..."

"I get it. But if I try to help without knowing this, I'm more likely to get caught in the crossfire."

"So, can you do something?" the Chief asked bitterly.

"I'll do what I can. And I'll keep your secret."

I stepped out into the biting cold. In the summer heat, I could use a minor cooling spell under my cloak to stay comfortable, but there's no such thing as a "minor warming" spell.

I had rushed out on impulse, but I hadn't even been promised a reward. The proprietress said she'd waive the inn fee, but that hardly seemed worth wandering through this freezing hell to deal with Naga and the "Rabazu." Still, I couldn't exactly go back in and negotiate now.

I let out a white sigh into the night wind and looked around. The snow and wind were intensifying. There was no moon, no stars—but there was light.

A magical light hung right above the inn's entrance, shining brilliantly. It was likely put there by Naga or Mezwood as a landmark for their return.

And then.

BOOM.

The sound of an explosion echoed from the mountain above, to my right.

They've found him.

I tightened my cloak and began to trek toward the sound, the snow already stinging my skin.

The snow crunched under my feet as I cut through the wind.

I should have been nearing the scene, but there wasn't a single sign of a struggle nearby. It was strange. Suspicion began to well up in my mind. Come to think of it, I

hadn't heard anything resembling the sounds of battle since those two initial explosions. Now, there was the possibility that I'd simply missed them because the wind barrier of my *Raywing* spell had muffled the outside world... but if Naga and the others were currently duking it out with the "Rabazu" around here, they at least would have lit some magical flares.

"——I see.....!"

I let out a low groan and turned on my heel while chanting a spell. It was simple, really. Naga and Mezwood had likely done exactly what I had done.

A diversionary tactic.

Mezwood, if not Naga, must have realized how fixated the "Rabazu" was on the inn. They probably moved just outside the village and fired off attack spells into the distant mountains to make it look like they were currently engaged there.

It was a trap for both the villagers—who wanted to interfere with them—and the "Rabazu." By doing this, they could lure the meddlesome villagers out into the mountains, while simultaneously tricking the "Rabazu" into thinking the coast was clear back at the inn.

And of course, the plan would be for Naga and the others to double back and lie in wait near the inn.

I wasn't going to let that happen!

Raywing!

I used the high-speed flight spell again and soared back toward the village. After traveling for a bit, the first thing I spotted was the light of a torch. That was—

I canceled the spell and landed beside them. I found the proprietress, Monoru, and the Chief.

"——We just couldn't stay put——"

"That explosion was a lure to draw us out!" I said, cutting her off.

They had likely come out of worry, but it had backfired.

"Naga and the others are probably near the inn! They're ambushing the 'Rabazu' there! I’m going on ahead, so you three get back to the village!"

Without waiting for their reply, I cast *Raywing* again. Soon, the magical light hanging on the inn came into view through the falling snow.

I looked up at the presence. It was on the roof of the house next to the inn. The magical light didn't quite reach that far, but I could make out the silhouettes perched atop it.

Two shadows on one end. One on the other. The two were likely Naga and Mezwood. Which meant the other one was—the "Rabazu."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I've finally cornered you, you rare beast, Rabazu!"

Naga’s triumphant voice echoed loudly through the snowy wind.

"No matter how much you run, this—"

Before she could even finish her boast, the shadow of the "Rabazu" vanished.

"Huh?"

Naga’s dumbfounded voice was immediately drowned out by a heavy *thud* and a small scream from Mezwood. One of the shadows collapsed!

I doubted my own eyes. If I were to interpret what I just saw plainly, the "Rabazu" had moved that entire distance in an instant and struck Mezwood. It was far too fast.

"Kuh!"

Naga hurriedly tried to create some distance—

"Noahhh!"

—and fell straight off the roof! There was a loud *crunch* as she hit the ground, and her presence vanished.

Ah... I bet she didn't take her footing into account...

That didn't matter right now. The shadow remaining on the roof moved. I couldn't see its face or form clearly, but it was obvious the shadow was looking right at me.

It leapt from the roof, landed in front of the inn, and then—it suddenly vanished before my eyes. Before I could do anything, a blur that could barely be called a shadow charged at me with a sound like the faint crunching of packed snow!

Crap!

I frantically drew the short sword at my waist and chanted a spell! The silver blade reflected the magical light, carving a white afterimage into the dark night!

Clang!

A heavy impact and a clear ring. My sword barely managed to catch the blow from the "Rabazu's" swinging arm. The limb felt as hard as oak; I could feel the rigid resistance through the hilt of my sword.

Right in front of me—was the face of the "Rabazu."

Above the jaws reminiscent of a dragon were dark, hollow eye sockets. Its face was covered in coarse animal fur. It was quite a sophisticated piece of work. If I hadn't been told it was a costume, I might have believed it was a real monster.

But I realized... it was possibly viewing me as an enemy too.

Considering I'd been firing off attack spells earlier, it made sense. This wasn't a situation where talking was going to work! If that was the case, I'd just have to knock it out and capture it!

Freeze Arrow!

I unleashed the spell I had prepared. A dozen arrows of cold fired from point-blank range should have frozen the "Rabazu" solid. But in the next moment, I watched as the arrows were swallowed uselessly by the darkness.

My ears caught the crunch of snow, and my hair fluttered in a faint breeze. I instinctively ducked! At that exact moment, something whistled past the back of my head!

No way!?

The "Rabazu" had dodged my point-blank spell and moved behind me in less than the blink of an eye! I have a fair bit of confidence in my physical and sword skills, but this thing was on a different level!

The Chief had called it "going wild," but that was far too mild a description. There was no way the villagers could handle this. In fact, no human could.

Time seemed to slow down. The thought of defeat flickered in my mind. Before I could recover my stance, the "Rabazu" would likely land its next blow.

I took one step, then two, kicking off the ground a third time—but the attack didn't come. After running a few more paces, I finally turned around.

The "Rabazu" was facing away from me. It was looking toward a torchlight some distance away.

It was the proprietress, Monoru, and the Chief.

"Move!" I screamed as I dove to the side.

The trio couldn't react in time and just stood there frozen! But the "Rabazu"—didn't move. It stood there as if shielding them.

BOOM!

The strike Naga unleashed from behind sent the "Rabazu," who had been standing perfectly still, flying high into the air.

A short while later, in the dining hall on the first floor of the inn.

Naga grumbled the exact same thing I had said earlier. "You could have just told us that from the beginning."

On the table we were all gathered around lay the unconscious "Rabazu." Or rather, it was wrong to call him that anymore. After peeling off the broken costume, a man in his thirties emerged. He was thin, with an overgrown beard and hair, but if he cleaned himself up, he’d probably be quite handsome.

He didn't look like he possessed such incredible physical ability, but perhaps by "becoming" the superhuman Rabazu, he had surpassed his natural limits. This was the true identity of the Rabazu—the master of this inn, Aeru.

The proprietress and Monoru stayed by his side while the Chief bowed to Mezwood at another table.

"Please, keep this a secret..."

Mezwood, nursing a bruise where the "Rabazu" had struck him, looked troubled.

".....Well.....!"

"I have no intention of talking," Mezwood said, sounding annoyed. "There's no way I could tell anyone about this. Putting it in an official report is out of the question. Even if I told it as a joke over drinks, people would just laugh and tell me to come up with a better lie."

Aeru let out a small groan.

"Honey!"

"Dad!"

At the calls of his wife and son, he blinked a few times.

"Ah... huh?"

He slowly sat up. "Fisir? Monoru? —Monoru, you've grown so big all of a sudden..."

"You don't remember?" The Chief nodded with a solemn tone to the confused man. "Aeru. While you were performing the ritual of Lord Rabazu, you accidentally went a bit too wild."

"Is that what happened?"

He accepted that way too easily!

The Chief pointed to us and explained that we were the ones who had brought him back to his senses.

"I see... Well, I'm very sorry for all the trouble I've caused you."

He bowed repeatedly to me, Naga, and Mezwood. Then, in a perfectly casual tone, he asked:

"So, does that mean you also saved the other people who went wild besides me?"

Crack. The air literally froze.

"Eh? What?" Aeru asked, looking flustered and unable to read the room.

".....Um..... just checking, but....." I asked timidly. I thought it couldn't possibly be true. But the Chief *had* said, when explaining Aeru, that it was a "common story."

"By any chance—are there others? Besides you, are there other people who accidentally went wild in the middle of the festival!?"

The Chief turned toward me. Slowly. Very slowly.

"If possible, we would like to borrow your strength—"

"**NO.**"

Me, Naga, and Mezwood all spoke in perfect, beautiful harmony.

There are many people in this world, and many customs. But among them, there are some customs that really just ought to be abolished.

In the end, we were made to help return about five other "Rabazus" to their human senses.

I thought about it long and hard. I had thought it was just a joke, but the Chief had accepted that absurdly irrational explanation of "going wild" without a second thought. And that was the most terrifying thing of all.

[White Night Beast - END]

Hospital Ghost Story [Part 1]

The stark white waiting room was thick with the heavy, stifling scent of medicinal herbs. Magical lights flickered here and there, illuminating the space, yet they failed to dispel the dark, oppressive atmosphere emanating from the patients sitting with their heads bowed. Occasionally, the sound of someone sniffing echoed through the air—a sound so somber it brought to mind a funeral service.

From deep within the building, a faint cacophony of overlapping chants could be heard, reminiscent of an otherworldly ritual. It was certainly an unsettling environment, the kind of place many would find repulsive.

"—Lina-san. Lina Inverse-san. Room 5, second floor, please."

A certain day of a certain month. I caught a cold. A cough, a slight fever, and a stuffed-up nose. My whole body felt sluggish. A cold is a tricky thing; you shouldn't underestimate it, but making a huge fuss over it feels a bit much too.

However, for a traveling mage like me, it’s not something you can just ignore. If I were to brush off a "minor cold" and take a job hunting thugs, only to find I couldn't chant a spell because of a coughing fit or a clogged nose at a critical moment—well, that wouldn't be a very funny joke.

Standard healing spells can fix physical wounds, but they don't do squat for a virus. Usually, the theory is to find a nice inn, eat easily digestible food, and rest. I probably would have done exactly that... if I hadn't caught this cold in Davon City.

Until the capital was moved fifteen years ago, this was the heart of the Kingdom of Raltigue. It's a massive city, but its most notable feature is the General Hospital.

"What's a 'General' Hospital?" you might ask. Sure, big towns have clinics, but this place is a massive, five-story white cylinder! Its majestic presence stands out even in a city this size. It’s said that if an injury or illness can’t be cured here, it can’t be cured anywhere in the world.

Since I started my travels, I'd always wanted to see it. I just didn't expect my first visit to be as a patient. I heard the fees weren't cheap, but I figured I'd treat it like a

paid tour. Dragging my heavy limbs, I followed the receptionist’s directions up the stairs to Room 5 on the second floor.

I knocked on the white door and pushed it open.

"I'm Lina In..."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

The room wasn't particularly large. The walls and ceiling were stark white, illuminated by magical lights. There was a desk in the front and a bed in the back. At the desk sat a single, white-haired elderly doctor. That part was fine.

The problem was the five other people in white coats standing in a perfect row behind him.

"You are Lina Inverse, I believe?" the elderly doctor said. Despite his age, his voice was vibrant and energetic. "Lina Inverse, recipient of the Title Robes from the Zephir City Mages' Association."

"Uh... yeah," I replied, bewildered.

My name gets around for better or worse, and the Association's list of titled mages is public knowledge, so it wasn't strange for someone connected to the medical field—which often overlaps with magic—to know me. But why were there five department heads looming in the back like a firing squad?

"Yes. Sit there and open your mouth."

Ignoring my confusion, the examination began. Visual inspection of the throat. Temperature check. A check of my body's astral balance via a diagnostic spell. All the while, the five doctors behind him watched me with unmoving, silent intensity. One of them even had face paint and tattoos like a witch doctor.

Is this really just a cold? Am I suffering from some legendary rare disease that they all had to come see for themselves?

After a short examination, the old doctor scribbled something on a piece of parchment.

"It's a cold. I'll prescribe some medicine." He set down his pen and looked at me. "That aside—I have a favor to ask of you."

"A... favor?"

"Yes. I am the Director of this hospital, Margura Romiz. These men behind me represent the various departments here."

The doctors bowed slightly. Romiz lowered his voice. "I want you to solve a 'trouble' currently occurring in this hospital."

"A... twouble...?" I repeated, my nose still stuffed.

"Exactly. Until the incident is resolved, we will have you stay as a patient. We will provide your room and three meals free of charge. And, of course, we will pay a separate reward fee."

"Wait a second," I said, my voice sounding nasal. "If I don't get over this cold, I can't even use spells properly. If things get rough, that's a problem."

"Don't worry about that," the Director nodded. "By my diagnosis, if you take your medicine and rest, you'll be fully recovered by tomorrow or the day after at the latest. If you accept, I will personally handle your case. I might be retired from the front lines, and my hands might shake a bit, and my memory might cut out for a second here or there... but my skills are top-notch!"

That doesn't sound very reassuring... But then again, for just resting and taking medicine, the Director's "shaky hands" probably wouldn't matter much.

"Anyway, I need more details. What's happening?"

Director Romiz furrowed his brow, hesitated for a moment, and then whispered, "This is strictly confidential... but they appear."

It was a story that was a bit too bizarre to be called a standard ghost story.

"The other day, a doctor saw a Cyclops—a one-eyed giant that filled the entire hallway near the morgue. A nurse saw a giant Slime on the stairs. A patient saw their deceased grandmother. Another saw a giant box sliding down the corridor."

"A box?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous," the Director said. "Ghosts are one thing, but a Cyclops and a sliding box? We have no idea what they are. There hasn't been any direct harm yet, but we can't guarantee there won't be. The staff and patients are on edge. They say 'illness begins in the mind,' and we can't leave the hospital in this state."

"I see... and I assume you've investigated?"

The doctors looked at each other.

"Er... well... a formal investigation has... yet to take place," the Director said sheepishly.

"Why not?"

"Because if they turn out to be real ghosts... it's scary, isn't it?"

I stared at him, speechless. "You're experts in medicine, but total amateurs in 'spook-busting,' I get it. And you don't want the staff getting hurt or making things worse."

"Exactly! So, do we have a deal?"

Free room, three meals, a tour of the facility, and a reward? Plus, the doctors promised to cooperate fully.

"Fine... I'll take the job."

Even with only the thin moonlight filtering in, I could see the whiteness of the room. I wasn't sure if it was early evening or the middle of the night.

After the deal was struck, I was brought to this private room. The plan was to rest until my cold was gone, then start the investigation.

After eating a bland hospital dinner and drinking some incredibly foul-tasting herbal tea, it was lights out. Hospital nights are annoyingly early. But perhaps because I was tired, or because of the tea, I had fallen asleep instantly.

And then, I woke up.

Silence, save for the sound of the wind. The air moving through the ventilation shafts connecting the rooms echoed strangely. It almost sounded like a voice...

I lay on my back, frowning in the dark.

No. It wasn't the wind. I was certain now. It sounded like voices. Faintly, from somewhere, these were actual voices drifting toward me. ...I couldn't tell if they were human.

A cacophony of voices—neither distinctly male nor female—muttered what sounded like overlapping incantations. It was impossible to make out the words. Was this what the Director had been talking about?

If so... I climbed out of bed and threw my cloak over my nightgown. Though I wasn't at 100%, a few hours of sleep had done wonders. The Director said there had been no "actual harm," and if I missed this chance, I didn't know when I'd get another opportunity to catch the phenomenon in the act.

I gently turned the doorknob, and a draft of chilly air snuck under my cloak. The hallway was straight, white, and endless. Here and there, magical lights had been dimmed to conserve their duration. They were bright enough to navigate by, but the meager light only seemed to make the lingering shadows feel deeper and heavier.

I focused. Mingled with the faint airflow, I heard it again—voices coming from the far end of the corridor. I set off. Alone. My footsteps, which I tried to stifle, echoed with a rhythmic *thud-thud* in the stillness of the night.

The voices were coming from the opposite direction of the nurses' station. I hadn't been given a full tour yet, so I didn't know what lay that way. As I moved toward the sound, the pungent smell of medicinal herbs grew stronger. This section seemed to house the special examination rooms. There were no windows, and each closed door bore a nameplate.

Eventually, I reached a staircase. The light on the landing cast sharp shadows across the wooden steps. A slight breeze blew past, carrying that eerie voice right to my ears.

I followed it down. From the third floor where the patient rooms were, down to the second. From the second to the first. There were no patient rooms on the first floor. Far down the hall, a lone light flickered at the entrance to the staff office.

Psychic Surgery Room. Ritual Room. Lemegeton Room. And then— A door with no nameplate at all. I could guess. Most likely... the mortuary.

But the voice wasn't coming from the mortuary; it was coming from further down the hall, behind a massive set of iron doors that blocked the corridor. I crept toward the doors.

"What are you doing!?"

I let out a shriek and spun around. Standing there was a nurse, probably just over twenty. Her long blonde hair was tucked neatly into her cap. I recognized her face, though it was currently twisted in a sharp scowl.

"Wandering around at this hour... You're the one from the special room—" She caught herself, her expression softening as she lowered her voice.

It was Muriel, my assigned nurse. On the left breast of her uniform was a tag with her name. She wasn't really there to nurse me so much as to assist with the investigation, so she was already in on the situation.

I gave a firm nod. "I heard a voice." "...A voice?" She repeated the word, and a natural silence fell between us. I strained my ears, but now all I could hear was the wind.

"From behind those doors." I gestured with my eyes toward the iron doors. Muriel looked skeptical. "I don't hear anything now. Can you open them?"

"Wait... just a moment." She turned and ran back toward the staff office. She returned shortly with a key in her hand.

"I'm opening it." Muriel slid the key into the lock. A small, metallic *clack* echoed.

I waved her back and grabbed the handle myself. The door creaked, a groan that vibrated through the night. Beyond the door was... Nothing but a hallway disappearing into the darkness.

I let out a sigh of relief.

".....What..... is that.....?" Beside me, Muriel let out a horrified gasp. "Huh?" "The light... it's gone."

At her whisper, I looked again and realized the truth. It wasn't that there were no lights. It was that the hallway was literally *blocked* by darkness. A massive, square

mass of shadows—looking like a giant box—was wedged in the corridor, cutting off our line of sight completely.

The darkness squirmed.

A scream echoed through the nighttime hospital.

".....As I thought, you still have a bit of a fever."

The next morning. Muriel stood before me as I sat up in bed, looking between a measuring stick and a chart with a frown. The "measuring stick" was a type of medical tool created through magical research. When held in the mouth, it changes color subtly based on body temperature. By comparing it to a color chart, a patient's temperature can be checked. It's only about the size of a palm, but since it was originally a piece of bamboo modified by sorcery, the name stuck.

Because they are difficult to manufacture and maintain, almost no hospitals carry them. I hadn't seen a real one myself until I came here.

"Those doors lead to the Pharmaceutical Compounding Wing," Muriel added. "I think wandering out last night contributed to this."

"There was something black there," I said. Muriel soaked the measuring stick in water to reset its color, whispering in a gloomy voice, "A giant box."

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could get a word out—

"How are you feeling?" The door opened, and Director Romiz walked in.

"She still seems to have a slight fever," Muriel reported. The Director nodded, closed the door, and sat in a nearby chair. "I heard something happened."

I nodded. "I woke up in the middle of the night and heard a strange voice." I felt better than yesterday, but even I could tell my voice was still nasal. "I went toward the voice and met up with her along the way—" I glanced at Muriel.

"There was this big, square *something*. It was like a solid block of darkness. It moved, so I let a spell fly."

It was lucky I had been able to chant properly despite my condition. "An Elmekia Lance. It’s a spell that works on ghosts and astral beings. It let out a huge scream and vanished."

"An astral being!" The Director’s face went pale at the word. But I kept my tone light. "Don't worry. At the very least, it wasn't a demon."

"How can you be so sure?" Muriel asked. I gave a small shrug. "Because the Director said there’s been no actual harm so far. If a demon were involved, we’d have seen some gruesome casualties by now."

"Then what could it be?" the Director mused, crossing his arms. I mimicked the gesture. "I can't say for sure yet. But it didn't look like a natural phenomenon." "You mean it’s someone's doing?" "It’s a possibility. Just to be safe, I have to ask: does anyone have a grudge against this hospital?"

Director Romiz and Muriel exchanged a look.

".....If we're talking about grudges, the list is infinite," the Director whispered gloomily.

"This is a hospital. Many patients pass away despite our best efforts. Their families might hold a grudge. Besides that, if you consider internal staff politics or external interests, there are countless possibilities."

"I see....." If it was too difficult to narrow it down by motive...

"Well then, when did these rumors about 'things appearing' start?" "I'd have to say... since a long time ago," the Director said with a shrug.

"This hospital was built just before the capital was moved. It was designed to function as a military hospital in times of emergency, so the construction is very sturdy. By the way, I assume you know the reason the capital was moved?"

I simply nodded. The official records say the capital was moved to stimulate commerce. But it’s an open secret that a bloody struggle for succession broke out within the royal family, and *that* was the real reason.

He continued. "Ever since the hospital was built, there have always been rumors of ghosts and the like. Rumors never die, but they were never treated as anything more

than talk, until they started escalating... Let’s see, I believe it’s been about six months now."

"No, I think it started about a year ago," Muriel interrupted. "But I think everyone was just trying to keep it from the Director’s ears."

"Why!?" the Director demanded. Muriel looked troubled. "Why...? Well, stories about seeing weird boxes or a Cyclops in the hallway... you might tell a friend, but you can't tell your boss. At worst, he'd think you'd lost your mind and fire you."

I groaned. "......For now, there are too few clues. I’m going to have to look into this seriously, but—" The Director nodded. "Then first, we need to get you back to full health. Ah, right, it’s almost time for your medicine. Muriel-kun, go to the pharmaceutical wing and bring it here."

"Yes, sir!" Muriel chirped and left the room. I, on the other hand, let my shoulders slump. "......Um..... that cold medicine of mine? It’s absolutely disgusting....."

The Director smiled brightly. "......Ah..... is it now.....?" "I know."

I muttered feebly. I’d taken it yesterday and this morning, and while it definitely made me feel better, it was... just... foul. It was a thick, dark green liquid that went down slimy and left an aftertaste that made me want to die. It was the kind of taste that makes your eyes water.

I let out a private sigh as I recalled the flavor—

GYAAAAAAAH!

A man’s unrefined scream ripped through the air! Before I knew it, the Director and I had bolted out of the patient room.

Following the Director’s lead, we headed to a different section than last night. We passed through a staff door on the third floor and down a set of stairs. Before we had gone very far, we hit a crowd of people.

The doctors and nurses froze at my words—

A dense crowd of medical staff had gathered. Through the gaps in the wall of people, I caught a glimpse of Muriel’s back.

I tried to push through the throng, but I collided with someone and lost my balance, falling flat on my backside. Normally, I could cut through a crowd like this with ease, but my body's reactions were sluggish. Curse this fever.

A door on the right side of the hallway swung wide open. From within, something massive and black began to crawl out slowly, slithering across the floor.

It was like a living patch of darkness. Deep within that undulating, squirming void, I saw a momentary glint of something bright. *“Gyihyugigumum...”* An incomprehensible voice—neither a spell nor human speech—leaked from the mass.

I tried to resume my chanting, but my rhythm had been broken by the fall. A shadow loomed over me. I looked up and saw only darkness. That occasional glint of light looked like a single, mocking eye peering down at me.

The spell won't make it in time. I realized this even as I continued to chant. It was likely the same thing I had seen last night. I didn't know what it was, but I knew an attack spell would work!

The darkness lunged toward me. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl.

"Everyone, get out of the way!" I managed to shout to the crowd as I formed the incantation in my mind.

But before the spell was finished, the darkness lunged. The watching staff screamed and began to stampede away—right toward where I was sitting!

A woman's voice hissed in my ear—probably another nurse. I nodded and scrambled to my feet. By then, the spell was ready.

"Elmekia Lance!"

The bolt of light pierced the glinting "eye" within the darkness. Was it a scream or the sound of destruction? With a high-pitched shriek, the darkness scattered and dissolved into the light. All that remained was the white hallway and the huddle of nurses standing on guard around me.

"What do you think you're doing to a patient!?"

With that sharp bark, Muriel’s heel-drop kick tore through the air where the shadow had been. As the darkness flinched, I felt myself being pulled back.

"Are you alright!?" "...Y-Yeah. Thanks."

Muriel gave me a bright smile. "Not at all. Ensuring the safety of patients is part of a nurse's duty."

".....On the other hand....." I trailed off, looking at the group of doctors shivering and hiding in the distance.

"Don't misunderstand," Director Romiz said, his legs still visibly trembling. "It's not that we didn't care what happened to the patient. We didn't run away because of that." ".....Then why are you all the way over there?" "Because," the Director said with a perfectly straight face, "ghosts are scary, aren't they?"

"Well... at least I know now that I can't rely on the doctors for anything....." I sighed.

"Lina-san! Look at this!" I turned toward Muriel, who was kneeling on the floor, inspecting something. I stood up slowly and crouched beside her.

Something was lying there.

"What is it?" "I'm not sure."

It was white. It looked like a pile of coarsely ground powder had been scattered about. It was clearly connected to the incident.

"I can check," Muriel said. She pulled a pair of gloves from her pocket and expertly scooped some of it into a wrap.

"Lina-san," the Director asked. "I have to know... has this kind of thing ever happened two days in a row before?"

Muriel thought for a moment before sighing. "...No, I think this is the first time."

"Then that settles it." I spoke loudly so everyone present could hear me. I looked at the Director and made my declaration.

"I was hired to investigate, and suddenly the incidents are happening back-to-back. This isn't a random haunting. This is artificial. It's the work of someone inside this hospital!"

Why is it that in this pristine white world of the hospital, fragments of darkness keep clinging to the walls? I actually like the smell of antiseptic, so why is the author a

total lightweight when it comes to alcohol? Lina has pointed the finger at an insider. Is the truth really there? And most importantly, will her cold ever get better?

Next time: **Hospital Ghost Story (Conclusion)**! Wait for it while lamenting the pathetic amount of Vitamin C found in actual lemons!

Hospital Ghost Story [Part 2]

"I'll admit it's a case of *force majeure*... but this fever just won't go down."

"I mean... taking care of yourself is part of the job, isn't it? Come on, take your medicine. Bottoms up."

I sat up in bed and muttered to myself, eyes downcast. All I saw were white sheets and my own two hands holding a cup. The cup was filled to the brim with a sluggish, greenish-black liquid. My own distorted reflection stared back from the surface.

"......Ughhh......" My hands shook as I slowly raised the cup.

A sharp smell hit my nose—a scent that practically screamed "lethal poison." It looked, smelled, and tasted like a death sentence, but its true identity was simply cold medicine. They say good medicine tastes bitter, but having to drink this multiple times a day was a special kind of torture.

"That only works if you actually *rest*," Muriel said from my bedside. "You were wandering around the night you were admitted and again the next day. You'll never get better like that." "......I didn't have a choice..... the incidents started happening....."

Knock, knock. "I'm coming in." The knock and the voice came at the same time. Before I could answer, Director Romiz entered the room.

His first words were: "I've identified that substance." "Substance?" I set the cup down on the side table. He spoke impatiently. "The white powder the shadow dropped yesterday." "Oh. That."

Yesterday afternoon, after I defeated that squirming darkness, we found white powder left behind. I had asked the Director to analyze it.

"You got the results fast," I noted. "Yes. As soon as night fell, it became obvious. It's *Muscus Calsulminorous*—simply put, a type of luminous moss. It was glowing in the dark room."

"Luminous moss?" I repeated. It was exactly what it sounded like—moss that emitted a faint light, usually found in caves. Why would that be here?

"We keep a stock of it as a medicinal ingredient, but the problem is that this moss is often used in **Necromancy**—dark sorcery."

Muriel and I both caught our breath at the same time.

"Does that mean... the culprit is one of the doctors from the Sorcery Department!?" Muriel asked excitedly. The Director shook his head. "I can't go that far yet. But it is a fact that the likelihood of that shadow being summoned via sorcery has increased significantly."

“I see. In that case…” I climbed out of bed. "Regardless, it's a huge lead. Let's start the questioning immediately!"

Muriel tapped my right shoulder. "Lina-san. Your medicine." *Damn, she remembered!*

I looked at her over my shoulder. "Listen! Speed is of the essence in an investigation!" She smiled sweetly at me. "But drinking one cup of medicine doesn't take that long, does it? Surely you aren't going to say something like, 'I don't wanna take my yucky-wucky medicine!' like a little baby... are you?"

"Wow, you're annoying." She had shifted into a mocking baby-talk tone for the last bit. I looked her in the eye and answered with a perfectly straight face: "I don't wanna."

Ignoring Muriel, who was still smiling even as a vein popped on her forehead, I left the bed and threw my cloak over my nightgown. "Come on, Director. Lead the way. Let's go do some questioning."
"......O-Okay."
"Wait! Lina-san!"

In the end, without drinking my medicine, I set off with the Director and Muriel to begin the interrogation.

Even with tattoos on his face and the title of Sorcerer, being sealed within the white world of a hospital and draped in a lab coat seemed to strip a person of all mystery and dread.

"I am certainly familiar with that luminous moss," said Dr. Zengia, the Head of Sorcery—one of the doctors I had met when I first arrived. He looked overtly displeased. "Surely you aren't suspecting me or my department based solely on that?"

"Of course not. Just a routine check. Unfortunately, I'm not an expert in sorcery. Besides, if I really suspected you, I wouldn't be doing the questioning here."

I looked around. We were in the doctors' station, a large room filled with desks. Other doctors were present, and nurses were constantly scurrying in and out. A few of them were clearly eavesdropping while pretending to organize paperwork.

The Director, Muriel, and I were sitting on chairs we had pulled up to face the Head of Sorcery.

"Instead of us, why don't you talk to the people who can command Cyclopes or Golems? Or perhaps the ones who manage the medicinal supplies?"

At the words of the Head of the Thaumaturgy Department, several of the doctors in the room turned toward him with offended expressions. They were likely the doctors in charge of pharmaceutical management.

However, I simply wagged my finger with a "tsk-tsk-tsk" and said, “A Cyclops has never appeared in this hospital before.”

The Head of Thaumaturgy—along with the doctors and nurses who were eavesdropping—knitted their brows.

“I know people talk about it, though. But my guess is that it’s just a combination of that rumor and a game of 'telephone.'”

“...A combination?”

I nodded slightly. “Something is appearing here. That much is certain. But the true identity of the strange things witnessed in this hospital so far is probably the same as the shadow I defeated yesterday.”

“The same?”

The Head of Thaumaturgy wore a bewildered expression.

“Yes. A ghost or something similar, summoned using that luminous moss as a medium.”

“That is... calling it 'forced' would be an understatement; it doesn't even qualify as an explanation. The shadow you defeated yesterday was some kind of amorphous thing containing luminous moss inside. You seem to think the spores of the moss were moving in a clump inside the shadow, but depending on the state, the light might be visible or invisible. Even if it is seen, the location varies. You don't seriously intend to decide that all the reported sightings of the rumored Cyclops or the deceased were simply misidentifications, do you?”

The shadow I had defeated yesterday was an amorphous entity containing luminous moss within it. From the fact that it had no physical substance and was affected by spirit-type attack spells, I assumed it was a ghost or something of that ilk.

“Half right. Half wrong. ...No, actually, it happens quite often. You know, the whole 'misidentification and misunderstanding' thing. Up until now, I’ve been asked to exterminate demons or ghosts, only to find out after investigating that it was just someone misidentifying something. The human eye is, in a sense, incredibly unreliable. For example, just three dots inside a circle can look like a human face, right? You don't have any objection to that much, do you?”

“Well... I suppose not,” he replied, nodding reluctantly.

“So, for example—suppose the shadow was elongated, reaching the ceiling, and there was a light from the moss near the top. Someone seeing that would say: 'It was as tall as the ceiling, and it had one glowing eye-like thing near its face.' To anyone hearing that, they’d imagine a 'giant with one eye,' right?”

The Head of Thaumaturgy looked startled. “And so, a Cyclops.”

“Exactly. The impression gets deformed as it's passed along. Apparently, there are other sightings like a dead grandma, a box, or a slime.”

“So?”

“Originally, it might have been someone saying, 'For a second, I thought it was my dead grandma,' or a story about something filling the hallway from floor to ceiling moving along that got described as 'it was like a giant box sliding along.' I bet those stories turned into what they are now as they were passed around. Slime is just amorphous to begin with.”

“I suppose... I can't say I don't follow the logic...”

While he gave his assent, the Head of Thaumaturgy still wore an unconvinced expression. I gave a small shrug.

“Of course, I’m open to believing another convincing theory if there is one. But thinking that a real Cyclops, a real slime, or a real dead grandmother appeared in the hospital is much harder to swallow. At least at this point, there’s no other way to explain it.”

“...Hmm...”

It didn't seem like he was fully convinced, but he had no grounds for a rebuttal. Just as the Head of Thaumaturgy fell silent—

“What I want to know is whether it's possible to create something like that amorphous shadow using sorcery or necromancy.”

“That... I believe it is not impossible in theory,” he said, speaking as he thought. “A ghost is a spiritual entity of a deceased human, or a part of one that has remained behind. They can only exist by 'misunderstanding' that they are not yet dead; in other words, by believing they still have a physical vessel. If a corpse is used as the vessel, it's a zombie; if bones are used, it's a skeleton. When using ghosts or spirits, the practitioner prepares something to serve as a vessel and makes the ghost believe it is their own vessel. Pure ghosts, on the other hand, are summoned by making them 'misunderstand' that such a vessel exists even though it doesn't. In this case, ghosts often take on the same appearance they had in life while remaining intangible. Are you with me so far?”

“Okay.”

The basic logic was similar to using a spirit to create a stone golem. I nodded in understanding.

“Now, as for how one could create an amorphous ghost. If there were such a thing as a 'slime ghost,' the explanation would be simple, but unfortunately, I’ve never heard of such a thing. So, how to make a ghost amorphous... in other words, how to make it lose its original shape... In theory, if you make multiple ghosts 'misunderstand' that a single non-existent 'vessel' is their own, their egos would mingle and they would become amorphous.”

I thought for a moment. “—So in short, you mean taking multiple ghosts and mixing them all together into one?”

The Head of Thaumaturgy nodded. “That is correct. Like a melton.”

“And the specific method for that?” I asked.

He gave a small shrug. “Who knows. There is no merit in doing such a thing. A ghost with multiple clouded egos is better described as a moving miasma. Since the ego that should be the core of its existence is clouded, it would be difficult even for the practitioner to control. On top of that, it might spontaneously decompose over time. There are no merits, only demerits. No eccentric would bother with such meaningless research. I wouldn't know about something no one has researched.”

He leaned back against his chair and let out a long sigh. “—I’ve been thinking, though. To begin with, as you say, is there even a culprit in this case?”

“Meaning?”

“You seem to think this incident is a form of harassment by someone inside the hospital... but if it were harassment, there should be plenty of other means. There’s no need to go out of one’s way to use a strange ghost. I suspect it might be a spontaneous occurrence due to some reason. Although the theory for controlling ghosts is somewhat established, the principle of ghost generation itself, that is, why a part of the astral body separates and remains, has not yet been fully explained. The established theory is that one leaves behind a grudge at the moment of death... but that isn't necessarily always the case. Ghosts are generated by principles that are, in a sense, unknown to us. In other words, it’s possible that unknown factors just happened to align in this hospital, creating a collective of ghosts.”

“Hmm.”

It was true that, as he said, locations or situations themselves could sometimes bring about magical effects. For example, even a simple pentagram or hexagram shape, if it became large enough, could interfere with spells in various ways. Utilizing that property, the entire city of a certain country’s capital was designed as a giant hexagram barrier. Therefore, the possibility that this hospital or the town itself was acting as a natural magical device wasn't zero—but—

“But I think it’s a bit much to dismiss it as a coincidence when these luminous moss spores appear out of nowhere and shadows start appearing one after another the moment I accept the investigation request. It’s not like they’re scattering the luminous moss used for medicine all over the place in this hospital, right?”

“...That is true, but...”

“I also think the theory that someone is continuing this misplaced harassment with strange sorcery is a bit of a stretch...”

“...I guess,” I replied vaguely.

I hadn't finished interviewing all the hospital staff. After leaving the office, I spoke to four or five more people—but around that time, my physical condition really started to take a turn for the worse. After Muriel pointed out I was sounding nasal, and Director Romiz ordered me to rest in my room in his capacity as both doctor and client, I couldn't exactly refuse.

To be honest, it was true that I hadn't gathered anything resembling a lead. I had gone out of my way to conduct interviews in front of many people to check their attitudes and reactions when I spoke, but in the end, no one showed any strange reactions. If the culprit had been there, I should have at least been able to put some pressure on them...

“Regardless, was there any point in me tagging along for these interviews?” Director Romiz grumbled. “You told me not to butt in, so I followed along in silence... but even without me, Muriel-kun could have guided you...”

“What are you talking about? Because the Director was there, the interviews went smoothly. If it were just an outsider like me and Muriel the nurse, we would have been constantly brushed off by people saying they're busy.”

As we talked, the group arrived in front of my hospital room.

“Come to think of it, Lina-san, your med—”

Muriel froze in place as she opened the door. I could pretty much guess why. While chanting a spell under my breath, I peeked over her shoulder into the room.

There was a black shadow draped over the empty bed. The faintly glowing mass inside it looked like a shining eye. No doubt about it. It was the same thing I had encountered twice before. The shadow shifted slowly toward us—but if you knew how to deal with it, it was nothing!

“Elmekia Lance!”

The spell I had already been chanting—the *Blast Spear*—hit it directly, and the shadow vanished effortlessly. All that remained was a pile of white powder on the bed: luminous moss spores.

“It appeared again.”

“It did.”

I muttered nonchalantly, as did Muriel. Having encountered it for the third time, we were quite calm. ...Only Director Romiz was trembling behind us in the hallway. Ignoring him, I entered the room.

Aside from that, there was nothing unusual in the room. A white room. The window remained closed. On the bedside table, the medicinal tea I hadn't drunk had completely cooled. My gaze stopped at the ventilation duct near the ceiling.

“I see. So it came from there.”

Muriel followed my gaze— “But if it’s a ghost, shouldn't it be able to pass through walls or floors?”

“If it were just a ghost, sure. But the luminous moss spores acting as the medium or core shouldn't be able to get in unless there’s at least some kind of gap. If it came through the gap in the door, someone should have seen it and caused a commotion before it reached this room.”

“...No. That is probably impossible.” Director Romiz answered my question after thinking for a moment. “All the ventilation ducts are connected to the cold-heat room in the basement of this hospital. However, those ducts aren't large enough for a person to fit into.”

“The cold-heat room?” It was a name I had never heard before.

“Rather than having you explain it here, it seems better to have you actually show me the way.”

The one who spoke up was Muriel, who had been listening in silence. “—Wait, you can't, Lina-san!”

“Your condition is worsening! You have to drink your medicine and rest properly! Come to think of it, you didn't drink your previous medicine either.”

She turned her gaze toward the cup on the table next to the bed. The cup containing that medicinal tea. —I'm not drinking that— I didn't say it this time, but instead said, "The shadow made its way all the way to this room. Since there's a chance I could be attacked in my sleep, I can't exactly 'rest easy' even if you tell me to."

"In the end, that just means I have to solve this case as fast as possible!"

"That may be true, but..."

As Muriel knitted her brows, the Director nodded.

"Fine. I understand." He turned to Muriel. "There's no use arguing about it. I will guide Lina-san myself. Muriel-kun, you go and arrange a different hospital room for her. And also—" He cast a sidelong glance at me. "Prepare a fresh, potent batch of that medicinal tea. Plenty of it. This is to ensure the investigation goes smoothly. You'll drink it, of course, won't you, Lina-san?"

"....."

For a moment, I was at a loss for words. However, being told it was for the sake of the investigation, I had no choice. I could do nothing but nod.

The room was a vast, dim space. It was likely about the size of the hospital's waiting room. In the center, several large stone tablets stood in a row, and on one wall, there were four giant windmills and an equal number of golems. I wondered if the area behind the windmills connected to the outside, as faint light leaked through the gaps in the stationary blades. Although several magical lights were lit in the room, they weren't enough to illuminate the finer details. Even the high ceiling I looked up at was merely dark, and I could just barely make out several holes that looked like ventilation ducts.

"This is the cold-heat room," the Director said, walking slowly around the area. He pointed to the stone tablets in the center. "We don't operate it during this season, but in the summer, the staff casts frost-type attack spells on those tablets, and in the winter, they use flame-type spells. And—"

He then pointed to the golems and windmills standing by the wall.

"These are also stopped at this time of year... but the mechanism is that the golems turn the windmills to send air through, and the heat or cold is distributed throughout

the hospital via the ventilation ducts. That’s how we keep the hospital cooler than the outside in summer and warmer in winter. You probably can't see them well from here, but those holes in the ceiling are the ducts. I remember the cleaning contractors we hired used to complain that they couldn't reach the depths for cleaning because the ducts are too small even for a child to fit inside.”

“...Hmm...”

I crossed my arms and looked up at the ceiling. Coming all the way here had only confirmed that investigating the inside of the ducts was impossible. In the end, I was back to having no leads.

As I was thinking, my body suddenly gave a violent shiver! My instincts sounded an alarm of approaching danger, and I snapped my gaze toward the entrance of the room as if jumping! I had expected to see Muriel standing there with a smile, holding a cup brimming with that medicinal tea—a liquid far more lethal than any deadly poison.

But what met my eyes was simply the door, remaining firmly closed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh. No. It’s just...” I turned back to the Director. “I thought I smelled medicine. I wondered if Muriel had arrived.”

“Ah. If that’s it,” he said, looking up at the ceiling, “the windmills aren't turning right now, so the smell of the cold medicine being made in the pharmaceutical lab must have drifted through the ducts. They probably make it in batches.”

“They make batches? For something like cold medicine?”

I looked at the Director with wide eyes. He looked back at me, equally surprised.

“What are you saying? Cold medicine is one of the least used medicines in our hospital. Why would we keep a stockpile?”

“That’s it!”

“Wh-what is?!”

I pointed a sharp finger at the bewildered Director.

“Think about it. This used to be the Royal Capital, so wealthy people and nobles live here. A few people come looking for cold medicine a couple of times a year, but that’s about it. ...What? Is there something on my face?”

“I mean…!”

I cut him off.

“Of course! If you have enough money for a single dose of cold medicine, an ordinary citizen could eat for half a month. If you were a resident of this town and caught a cold, would you come here to buy medicine, or would you choose to eat something nutritious and easy to digest and just sleep it off?”

“...Well, that’s true.”

“Maybe in the future, someone will invent a cheap cold medicine that keeps well, but for now, the answer is obvious, isn't it?”

“So you’re saying...”

“You don't... use it...”

Thud! The door to the room slammed open with a clatter, cutting off my words.

“Director, it’s terrible!”

It was Muriel’s voice, sounding completely out of breath. Her face was etched with panic.

“The people from the Thaumaturgy Department and the Pharmacy Department! They’ve started a fight, accusing each other of being the culprit!”

“What?!”

Damn it! Did my pressure during the interviews backfire?!

“We’re going to stop them! Lead the way!” I shouted, and without waiting for a reply, I dashed out of the room.

The situation had long since moved past a mere verbal spat; the doctors and nurses were already in the middle of a full-blown war in the hospital hallway. They were screaming, throwing things, and firing off bizarre "special moves."

“Water Pillow Magnum!”

“Behold the secret art of Black Magic! Dance of the Medical Waste!”

“Scalpel!” “Here!” “Forceps!” “Here!” “Cloth soaked in someone’s sweat!” “Here!”

“Intestinal Volvulus Slash!”

“Number two! I’m making the Mandragora scream!” “Anything but that!”

“How dare you take my pork feet!”

It was, in a word, total chaos. For the time being, I took a deep breath, jumped into the middle of them, and screamed, “Wait a minute! Stop it!”

The moment I shouted...

Splat-splat-splat-splat! Countless objects flying from all directions hit me squarely across my entire body! There was no pain, but it was cold and slimy. I picked up one of the things stuck to my cheek to look at it—it was an aloe core.

...Ho, ho...

With a wide smile plastered on my face, I began chanting a spell under my breath.

Dug-Haut!

When I presented them with the choice between death or surrender, for some reason, everyone chose the latter. Hospital people really have no backbone.

“It’s still in the hypothesis stage—but the mystery is solved.”

I made this declaration before all the hospital staff, who were for some reason all sitting in a formal kneeling position. The wind blowing in from a hole in the wall was a bit chilly. Even Director Romiz and Muriel were kneeling with the rest of them...

Looking at their singed clothes, I wondered if I had accidentally caught them in the blast.

Well, setting aside such trifles.

“There is no culprit. Those shadows were generated by an accidental mishap.”

“Now wait just a minute!”

The one who shouted was the tattooed Head of Thaumaturgy.

“Didn't you say it was intentional?! You said it quite clearly!”

“Hmph! The 'me' of today is different from the 'me' of yesterday! I’d appreciate it if you didn't lump us together!”

“We’re talking about today!”

“Losing sight of the truth just because you’re obsessed with pride and things you said in the past is a much bigger problem! ...That’s right! Besides, saying it was 'someone’s doing' was just an interrogation technique to smoke out the culprit if there was one!”

“You just thought of that, didn't you?”

“I did not! Anyway, what do you think the deal was with those shadows appearing one after another the moment I arrived?!”

“It needs verification, but likely—” I looked around at everyone and said, “It’s because I had a cold.”

A brief silence followed. And then:

“*Huh?*” Their voices harmonized perfectly.

“The ventilation ducts of this hospital have become a magical device.” I continued my explanation regardless. “There’s a certain type of luminous moss growing in the deep parts of the ducts where they can't be cleaned. Most likely, spores that scattered during medicine production took root there. Luminous moss spores. Smoke from processing various magical materials. The shape of the ducts might also be related. And, of course, the airflow within them. Various factors piled up, and when the final factor was added—the entire hospital became a magical device for summoning ghosts.”

“The final factor...?”

I nodded at the Director’s murmur.

“Yes. The smell or smoke produced when making cold medicine. People only came looking for cold medicine once in a while before... but because I caught a cold after being asked to investigate the case, we ended up with a hospitalized cold patient. Because of that, cold medicine was being made constantly—and as a result, those shadows appeared frequently. It seems they had appeared several times before in the same way, but according to the Head of Thaumaturgy, they are extremely unstable, so they must have naturally dissipated.”

“Wait a minute! If that’s true, then this whole commotion over the last few days wouldn't have happened if you hadn't come!”

The Head of Thaumaturgy made a rather painful point, but I remained perfectly composed.

“You’ve got the perspective backward. If I hadn't been hospitalized with a cold, the case would never have been solved. Of course, at this stage, it’s nothing more than a hypothesis—”

Before I could even say that since they had been making cold medicine just now, another shadow might appear...

As if to confirm my hypothesis, a scream echoed from the direction of the patient wards!

And so, the inexplicable incident at the giant hospital was resolved. After exterminating the shadow in the other ward, we tried making cold medicine again at a later time, and with a slight time lag, an amorphous ghost was generated with a high probability. Of course, I made sure to finish them off properly.

Once the cause was understood, it was no big deal. The matter was easily settled by renovating the ventilation ducts. I’d like to say they lived happily ever after, but—

“Now, Lina-san, it’s time for your medicine! Today’s medicine has been mixed with useless ingredients to make it three times more bitter than usual!”

“Nooo! I don't want that useless power-up—*gack, cough!*”

In the end, my cold took a turn for the worse after that, and I was forced to continue drinking that wretched medicine for another four or five days.

(Hospital Ghost Story: End)

Recommendations of Chivalry [Part 1]

The sand fell. The pasta danced. I plunged my fork into a mountain of spaghetti, shoveling it into my mouth without even sparing the time to twirl it. Sauce was splattering and I was making a racket; even by my own standards, I couldn't flatter myself by saying my manners were good. But now was not the time to worry about such things!

“Incredible!” “Go for it, big sis!” “Just a little more! Just a little more!”

Half of the sand in the hourglass still remained, but the pasta was already eighty percent gone. Ha! A piece of cake! For me, Lina Inverse—warrior and sorceress alike—an eating contest of this level was like taking candy from a baby... or rather, like twisting a baby's arm until their mother scolded me! At this rate, I felt like I could jump straight into a "Next Challenge" immediately after finishing!

The table was surrounded by older men and younger guys cheering me on. Among them, I could see the face of the shop manager, who had turned a ghastly shade of pale. I plunged my fork into the final few strands of spaghetti.

The reason things had turned out this way was simple. At the entrance of the eatery, I had spotted a sign: *“Our Famous Extra-Large Pasta. Free if Finished Within the Time Limit.”* On the day one finds such a sign, is it not a failure as a human being to refuse the challenge?!

In cases like this, you occasionally run into trouble—the food tastes terrible, the noodles are half-raw rather than al dente, or you challenge it thinking it’s spaghetti only to be served a solid brick of lasagna. But this place served perfectly normal, delicious spaghetti.

Slurp, slurp, slurp.

Then, it happened!

From the doors, the windows, and even the ventilation ducts—an infinite number of sea cucumbers flooded in, filling the room in an instant! They overflowed! The restaurant fell into total panic.

“A Knighthood?”

I reflexively knitted my brows at the words of the old man behind the counter, who hadn't stopped scrubbing a plate. We were at a different eatery near the scene of the incident. Because of the awkward hour, there were few customers.

Velour City, located in a corner of the Kingdom of Raltigue, was a seaside castle town that looked up at Lord Rudin’s castle on the heights. Naturally, the Lord’s official knighthood was stationed here, but...

“They aren't regular knights, of course. Just a bunch of guys calling themselves that,” the old man said with a wry smile.

“So, basically hoodlums?”

I sat at the counter and sipped the apple juice I’d ordered in lieu of an information fee.

“Well, you could put it that way.”

After the incident, I had waded through the sea cucumbers to leave the shop and found an inn to pull myself back together. I’d finished changing in silence, but the moment I saw two sea cucumbers had managed to crawl into my rucksack, a slight murderous intent flared up within me. I didn't know whose work this was, but I was going to find them, beat them down, and confiscate some consolation money. With that intent, I had started my investigation.

“The word is that they think the current knighthood isn't up to snuff. They claim they are the ones fit to be knights. Apparently, they’ve been pestering the official knights with little harassments. This area is a popular hangout for the knighthood's men, so that shop was probably targeted today. You just got caught in the crossfire.”

“...I see...” I groaned, exhausted. “But if that’s the case, why does the local knighthood leave them be?”

“Well, it’s not that they’re exactly leaving them be...”

The old man’s words were cut off by a flashy noise as the shop door swung open. Outside, the afternoon sun was still high, casting the figure standing in the doorway into deep shadow.

Clank. The sound of scraping steel. A figure in a suit of armor and a helmet stepped into the shop. Scanning the empty interior, the knight walked toward us, eyeing me as if sizing me up.

“I take it you are a traveling sorceress? If you would be so kind, may I have a word?”

He spoke with a sonorous voice. He looked to be around fifty. While his beard was beginning to show streaks of white, his well-maintained full plate armor and the longsword hanging at his hip suited him perfectly.

“—That’s not another fake knight, is he?” I whispered.

The old man whispered back, “See the deer crest on the breastplate? He’s one of the regular knights I mentioned, the ones chasing those guys.”

“I am Goldof of the Rudin Knighthood!” With that, the knight suddenly—*shing!*—drew his sword!

I reflexively leaped back and took a combat stance. Even the shopkeeper ducked behind the counter. Completely ignoring our reaction, the knight thrust his sword toward the heavens—the tip naturally got stuck in the ceiling, but he didn't care.

“A knight is one who carves a path with his own sword! And to a knight, a lady is one to be protected! Therefore! While I appreciate the sentiment of your assistance, I cannot possibly accept it!”

How should I put it... he was a man of chivalrous spirit, the likes of which you rarely see these days. His "lady" comment earned him some points, but he seemed a bit lacking in situational awareness.

“Wait, wait just a minute!”

To be honest, I had been doing a bit of mental math: get involved in the case, shake down the villains for consolation money, and then collect a reward from the knighthood on top of that. Imagining that scenario slipping away, I had to put a stop to his exit.

“So, Lady Inverse,” he said, prying the sword out of the ceiling with a few grunts and sheathing it. “What was the situation?”

“Well, the incident just happened suddenly while I was eating. I didn't notice anything in particular... but as someone who got caught up in it, I wanted to know what’s going

on. I heard rumors that they’re a group called the 'True Knights' or something... Is the investigation going well?”

He gave a single nod. “I see. A misfortune indeed. But worry not. The investigation is proceeding. According to the reports we've gathered, around the time the crime occurred, a group of about twenty young men carrying large quantities of sea cucumbers was seen loitering around the targeted shop...”

“Twenty people carrying massive amounts of sea cucumbers? No matter how you look at it, that's unnatural!” I shouted. “Did the people who saw that not report it?! Before the crime even happened?!”

“...The indifference of city dwellers toward their surroundings is truly lamentable.”

“That's not a 'city dweller' problem! Once it gets to that level, it's something else! I heard knights hang out at that shop all the time—how did no one do anything?!”

“Well, don't ask me...” He groaned with a troubled expression. “In any case, Lady Inverse, those young men were not there when you entered the shop, correct?”

When asked—I recalled the moment I entered. The first things that caught my eye were the words “Extra-Large” and “Free.” Enticed by them, I had passed through a group of young men holding large woven baskets to get to the entrance...

They were there... They were totally there... those guys...

“Now that you mention it... I feel like I might have seen the faint shadows of people who looked like that, cleverly blending into their surroundings... Yeah. I’m going to overlook that. It couldn't be helped. Totally unavoidable.”

“...A 'cleverly blending' problem, then?”

“Exactly that kind of problem,” I stated firmly. “So, does that mean these 'True Knights' consist of about twenty people in total?”

Bankiss stared at me in silence for a moment before asking, “And what do you intend to do with that information?”

I blinked at the sharp light in his eyes.

“...You are a victim of the incident, and you clearly seem capable. It’s possible you are thinking of handling those fake knights on your own. However, Lord Rudin has

entrusted the investigation and resolution of this matter to me, Bankiss. I must ask you to refrain from interfering! Is that clear?”

It was less a request or a piece of advice and more of a direct order.

“But wouldn't extra hands be useful for solving the case...?”

“Unnecessary.” He cut me off sharply as I tried to press the issue. “This is my mission. I repeat: do not interfere.”

He declared it "unnecessary," and without waiting for my reply, he spun on his heel and marched out of the shop.

...Hmph. Stubborn, isn't he?

“Well, that’s how he is.”

Waiting for the knight to vanish, the old man spoke to me from behind the counter. “What’s more, the rumor is that he’s the only one currently assigned to this case.”

“Just one person?!” I blurted out.

The old man shrugged. “I wonder if the Lord actually has any intention of solving this... Well, the True Knights’ activities are basically just glorified pranks. He probably thinks it’s not worth putting real effort into the investigation... but it’s a huge nuisance for us. A while back, the shop owners around here talked about pooling their money to hire mercenaries to deal with the hoodlums. But then that knight came along and said, 'Leave such matters to the knighthood. You are not to interfere.' And so, the hoodlums are still running wild to this day.”

“...I see! ...”

I thought for a moment. “Hey. Since the knight told you to stop, you can't exactly pool your money to hire someone... But! What if someone, somewhere, just happened to defeat those hoodlums on their own? Don't you think you might feel like giving that 'someone' a little something as a token of your gratitude?”

The old man thought for a moment, and I flashed him a grin.

“...You mean, miss...?”

“No, no. I’m not talking about anyone specific. This is strictly a 'what if' scenario.”

“...Hm.” The old man chuckled softly. “I suppose. If such a kind soul existed... our place would probably give about ten silver coins as thanks.”

“Great. I heard you loud and clear.”

Even if the reward—I mean, the "gratitude"—from each shop was small, it would add up to a decent amount in total. I was suddenly full of motivation. Sorry to that Bankiss guy, though.

Alright! Just you wait, you fake knights! Including the "thanks" for getting me covered in sea cucumbers, I’m going to crush you!

A whistle drifted on the salt-scented wind. A man walked up the beach path with both hands shoved in his pockets. Then, the whistling stopped.

“You’re Mick, right?”

He noticed a black shadow—me—standing near his house.

“...And who are you...?” The man looked me up and down. Well, it was a natural reaction when a black-cloaked sorceress you’ve never seen before is waiting at your home.

This city faced the sea, so many people made their living by fishing. In the harbor, rows upon rows of fishing boats swayed gently on the waves. A short distance away, there was a spot where the mountains pressed close to the sea. The mountains were covered in greenery, but the base of the cliffs was eroded by waves, revealing red earth. In that rugged area, there was just enough flat land to stand on. In a place where a heavy rain could easily lead to disaster, there stood a single building—too grand to be called a shack, but too flimsy to be called a house.

That was the residence of this man, Mick. It was where we were now. It was a late afternoon, a bit early to be called evening. There were no other houses nearby; it was just the two of us.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come home. I asked the fishermen at the harbor, you see. You—” I gave him a bright smile. “You’re a member of the 'True Knights,' aren't you?”

“—Wh—!”

The man’s face twitched with comical obviousness. “What the...! You're talking nonsense! I’m...!”

“The sea cucumbers were a mistake,” I murmured.

The man fell silent for a moment. “...Wh... what do you mean by that?”

He might as well have confessed to being involved. I began to walk slowly around the area for no particular reason.

“Have you ever eaten a sea cucumber?”

“No. Never.”

“—I thought so. Neither have I. I’ve heard stories that there are regions where people eat them, but that’s strictly the exception. Normally, people don’t eat them.”

“What are you trying to say?!”

“In other words, to a fisherman, sea cucumbers are just a nuisance that doesn't even sell. Even if you catch one while fishing, you probably just toss it back into the sea on the spot. You wouldn’t go out of your way to bring it back to the harbor. So, how did those guys get their hands on such a huge amount if fishermen don't even bring them back to port? The answer is simple. There’s a fisherman among the members, and he caught them himself. When I asked if there were any fishermen who had brought back a lot of sea cucumbers lately, or had been out at sea at weird hours compared to everyone else, your name came up immediately.”

“I... I don’t know anything about that!”

Throwing those words over his shoulder, he hurried past me—or tried to.

Z-baaaaang!

A single attack spell from me, and the man went tumbling over. I wanted to ask him a few things, so I had used a low-power spell. Standing over the man as he groaned, I spoke in a relaxed tone.

“N-no... wh... what...”

“Hm-hm-hm. It seems like you’ve got the wrong idea about something—”

Standing a short distance away, I looked down at the twitching man and made a grand declaration.

“What?!”

“I haven't the slightest intention of trying to correct the path of young people who are heading in the wrong direction!”

“Any scoundrels who bury a maiden in her prime under a pile of sea cucumbers deserve ten thousand deaths! That being the case... if you honestly tell me the names and locations of all the members, I’ll let you off with a bargain price of nine thousand two hundred deaths instead of the usual ten thousand. How about it?”

“That’s barely a discount...!”

“If you’re unhappy with that, I can make it nine thousand five hundred deaths.”

“The discount is getting smaller?!”

“Of course it is.”

I put even more distance between myself and the man.

“Information is all about freshness. Its value drops the more time passes. Especially since I no longer need to ask you. —You’ve come to save your buddy, haven't you? Come on out! Or do you think hiding and ambushing a woman is what a knight would do?”

For a moment, only the sound of the wind answered my raised voice—

“Huh-huh-huh-huh! You figured it out, did you!”

The voice came from higher up the slope of the mountain behind the house.

Looking up toward the source of the voice, three shadows appeared from behind the trees! The one in the middle, standing with his arms crossed, was dressed as a knight in full plate armor, a helmet, and a cape. The two flanking him were dressed in black clothes and black jackets that looked somewhat like uniforms. All three had the lower halves of their faces hidden by black handkerchiefs, but they appeared to be around twenty years old.

“I heard there was a woman sniffing around... but I didn't expect you to find Mick's place so quickly.”

“So you’re what... the boss of the so-called True Knights?” I asked, looking up at the knight as he spoke down to me from his high horse.

“Huh-huh-huh-huh! You don’t understand, girl! You don’t understand true chivalry!”

Dismissing my comment with a laugh, the man drew his sword and held it high toward the sky.

“Listen well, girl! A knight must help the weak and crush the strong! In other words, it means being anti-establishment!”

“THAT’S NOT WHAT IT MEANS!”

I shot back an immediate retort. Sure, there are people in the world who believe it’s cool to say "no" to anything important people say without thinking! But these guys were getting the basic definition of the words wrong before they even got to that point!

The armored figure in the middle looked down at me.

“That is correct! I am Zilva, the leader of the True Knights! I seek to cast aside the current knights who have fallen into being the Lord’s lapdogs, and to practice true chivalry!”

Despite my correction, Zilva didn't budge an inch. He lowered his sword and said, “Hmph. Perhaps it is simply impossible for women and children to understand the path of a knight!”

“No, um.”

The strength drained out of my shoulders as I muttered listlessly.

“Knighthoods are usually like that... lapdogs of the Lord, I mean.”

Ah. I got it. Okay, I got it, I really got it. I waved my hands dismissively. Basically, he was one of those "difficult" people that it was useless to talk to.

“I know not why you pursue us. But I shall give you a piece of advice. Forget everything and leave the city. Even we—”

“Shut up, Fireball!”

Ignoring his sleep-talking, I chanted a spell and unleashed it the moment it was complete!

Gobo-baaaaaang!

The flames erupted with a roar! The released sphere of light scattered fire with an explosion the moment it hit something! That one hit should have blown away the self-proclaimed knight and his two followers. But.

The blast didn't happen at the men's feet, but in mid-air where there was nothing. The flames only scorched the atmosphere. My sphere of light had been shot down in mid-air by a small stone thrown from the side.

I gasped and turned my eyes toward where the stone had come from—the opposite direction of Zilva and his crew. Standing there, having appeared out of nowhere—

“Interference is unnecessary. I believe I told you that.”

It was the knight in full plate armor.

“Bankiss-san!”

He stood there, sending a sharp gaze toward Zilva and the others. It was the knight I had met earlier in the city. He had thrown a stone from the side and jammed my attack.

“Why did you interfere?!”

I raised my voice in protest, but he didn't even look at me.

“This is my mission.”

...Ugh. There he went again with that stiff-necked attitude...

Zilva of the True Knights looked down at him from the mountain slope.

“It’s been a long time. Father.”

“Wh-whaaaaaaaaat?!”

I couldn't help but cry out. I looked back and forth between the two armored figures.

“‘Father,’ you say...?”

“That is correct!” Bankiss-san nodded slightly. “That man, Zilva Bankiss, is my disgrace of a son! Yes. I intended to teach and raise him in the ways of chivalry, but for some reason, he misinterpreted every single knightly teaching and lost his way!”

“What are you saying, Father!” Zilva raised his sword meaninglessly again. “Father, you taught me! Chivalry is about sticking to your guns! In other words! If you think 'Wait, am I maybe wrong?' halfway through, you lose!”

“YOU’RE MISINTERPRETING AGAIN!”

As I fired off another retort, Bankiss-san said from the side, “No, what he just said isn't entirely wrong.”

“That’s what being a knight is!”

“In any case!” Bankiss-san drew his sword and held it toward the heavens. “A knight must take responsibility for his own actions! Therefore, it is only logical that I, the father, settle the son’s misconduct!”

So that’s why he was put in charge of cracking down on the True Knights and insisted on solving it with his own power alone. ...I don't really care, but can this father and son not talk without raising their swords?

“I see. I understand the situation.”

At my words, Bankiss-san let out a sigh of relief—

“You understand? Then—”

“BUT I DON'T GIVE A DAMN!”

“What?!”

Both father and son cried out in surprise at my shout.

“In the first place, you!” I pointed my right hand at Bankiss-san. “Because you failed in your education as a parent! This guy!” I turned my finger toward Zilva. “Ended up in a situation where he buried me in sea cucumbers! If you say that’s your responsibility as a father, then this is my responsibility as a victim! I’m going to do this my way!”

A blue vein popped out on Bankiss’s forehead. “How selfish can you be!”

“Don’t you talk to me about being selfish!”

As the gaze between me and Bankiss sparked with friction—

“Mick. It’s about time, isn't it?”

Zilva’s voice rang out, and the man I had knocked down with my spell suddenly scrambled up and ran toward the True Knights!

“...!”

Crap! He recovered from the damage while we were arguing! In that case, I’ll blow them all away together! I started chanting a spell under my breath—

The hands of the two men on either side of Zilva became a blur. A flash of murderous intent flickered in the wind—I jumped reflexively as a small silver light whizzed past me with a hum! Judging by the size, it was probably a metal projectile. One was thrown at me and the other at Bankiss to check our movements.

But my spell wasn't interrupted. And then.

“Don’t underestimate me!”

Bankiss roared and kicked off the ground. The projectile aimed at his face was deflected by his helmet as he lowered his posture; it didn't even serve as a distraction. The man who had been lying down reached the side of the other three.

Not missing that moment, I unleashed the spell I had chanted!

“Flare Arrow!”

I fired it casually. Over a dozen arrows of flame were born and surged toward the fake knights—Zilva took a step forward!

“Hah!”

With a shout of spirit, he grabbed his own cape with his right hand and swung it, batting away the incoming arrows of flame!

No way! I gasped slightly. He had batted away only the arrows of flame that were about to hit them directly. Needless to say, that wasn't a feat that could be done easily. Zilva threw away his burning cape.

The two men in black clothes took more projectiles from their pockets.

“ZILVAAAAAAA!”

Bankiss roared as he rushed in, but before he could close the distance, the men in black slammed what they were holding onto the ground!

Pop!

A dull explosion and overflowing smoke. —Smoke bombs, not projectiles?

“—Ugh?!”

Bankiss stopped in his tracks. Considering the danger of an ambush, he couldn't just rush in recklessly. He stood there on guard. Before long, after the sea breeze drifted the smoke away, Zilva and the others were gone.

They got away—

I let out a small sigh. I could probably chase them if I wanted to. But even if I caught up, there was a risk that Bankiss would just get in my way. Besides—at the very least, Zilva and the two beside him seemed to be somewhat capable.

“...Tch...”

Even if their brains were like that, they weren't opponents I could take lightly. In any case, pursuing them further in this situation was forbidden.

Bankiss clicked his tongue and turned toward me. “I’m warning you, if you interfere again next time, I won’t overlook it, even if you are a woman.”

“Don’t talk like I was the one interfering! You’re the one who obstructed me from the side just now! In the first place! If you had cooperated with others instead of insisting on settling it with your own hands, you might have caught them already!”

“Then I would not be fulfilling my duty as a knight!”

Aaaargh, this guy. I scratched my head furiously and pointed at him.

“FINE, WHATEVER! I don't care if you 'overlook' me or not! But if you’re going to prioritize your own pride over knocking those guys down and making the city a little more peaceful, then next time I’m blowing you up along with them, so be ready!”

“Do as you please!”

With that, he turned his back and walked away.

...Good grief. Norms and discipline exist so that everyone can live smoothly, so why prioritize them to the point of losing sight of the goal? Well, there are people like this in the world from time to time.

Regardless, the investigation was back to square one. I let out a sigh, turned around, and headed back toward the city. The sun was directly overhead, and the delicious smells of various dishes were beginning to drift through the city streets.

The next day, after the incident.

I had been continuing my inquiries here and there. About Zilva. About the social circles of Mick the fisherman. I had heard a few stories, but the location of their hideout was still unknown. I had also looked into Bankiss, thinking the father-son relationship might lead to Zilva... but it seemed that knight was the type who didn't let his private life show, so leads from that angle were nearly non-existent.

But in any case, the real show starts now. There was no point in getting worked up for nothing. For now, I should get some food and build up my spirit and strength for the afternoon! Now then, the problem was where to eat. As I was scouting the area for a good-looking restaurant—

Thud! Aaaaah!

A dull thud and a roaring scream. Don’t tell me the True Knights were active again today! I ran toward the sound, weaving through the buzzing crowd. The moment I turned the corner, what met my eyes was—

Dugan!

It was the sight of one of the shops up ahead exploding from the inside! Panic erupted among the pedestrians. While everyone else was scrambling away from the shop to escape, I pushed through the crowd and drew closer to the building.

It must have been a seafood restaurant. A wooden sign with a fish painted on it had been blown off and lay discarded on the roadside. The windows and doors rattled in the wind—

As I neared the storefront, I came to a dead stop. I had sensed a far-from-ordinary murderous intent drifting from inside the shop.

“...N-fufu, fufufufu...”

I heard a muffled chuckle that sounded somewhat familiar. The tone steadily rose—

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

Finally, it erupted into a burst of idiotic laughter!

People nearby fled, children wailed, and the men who looked like guards with swords at their hips merely watched from a distance, paralyzed by fear. Across the small, deserted field that had formed around the shop, I walked alone.

“Hey! Don't go! I don't know what it is, but it's dangerous! Probably!”

A warning voice called out from behind me. I ignored it and kept walking. The voice from inside continued to echo. Even now.

“Ho-ho-ho-ho! I don't know who you are, but how DAAAARE you trigger a seaweed avalanche on me! What a DELIGHTFUL thing to do!”

“It was the work of the so-called True Knights.”

At the sound of my voice interjected during a pause, the laughter ceased for an instant. I stopped at the entrance and peered into the shop through the broken door.

Broken tables. Broken chairs. People collapsed all over the place. And every single bit of it was covered in dark, slimy seaweed—*mozuku*.

There was no mistaking this "artistic style." This was definitely the work of the True Knights. Standing tall in the center of the shop, now completely transformed into a seaweed zone, was a single shadow drenched in *mozuku*.

I continued, speaking toward the shadow.

“They did something similar to me. So, I’ve been moving around to try and knock them down—say, Naga. If you’re interested, why not join in?”

Even covered head to toe in seaweed, that black shadow was unmistakable. It was the woman sorceress who lacked all common sense and called herself my rival: Naga the White Serpent!

“.....”

She let out a small laugh and shifted her body. She brushed back a mass that could have been *mozuku* or her own long black hair and looked at me, her eyes filled with resolve and murderous intent.

“Let us hear this interesting story then, Lina Inverse!”

(Recommendations of Chivalry: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

Lina and Naga finally join forces! The melody they play is one of destruction! Is there a tomorrow for Velour City?!

Facing an absolute crisis, a father and son who once parted ways will find their bond again! In that moment, their combined strength will call forth a miracle!

...Well, I don't think the story will actually go like that! Next time: *Recommendations of Chivalry [Final Part]*!

As for the observation that the author hasn't thought of the second half's developments at all—just ignore that and wait!

Recommendations of Chivalry [Part 2]

Synopsis In the seaside castle town of Velour City, there were hoodlums calling themselves the "True Knights" (Light Knights)! They spent their time harassing the official knights. Lina got caught up in their harassment and decided to subjugate the fake knights. However, the official knight in charge of the investigation, Bankiss, stubbornly refused Lina's cooperation. Eventually, Lina met Zilva, the leader of the fake knights, who completely misinterpreted the knight's code! The official knight Bankiss interrupted the scene! Lina learned that Bankiss and Zilva were father and son; because Bankiss wanted to correct his son's mistakes, he insisted on solving the matter with his own strength alone. Zilva fled the scene, and Lina and Bankiss parted ways. Then, the True Knights struck the city again! Lina met Naga, who had also been caught up in the incident—and they joined forces to defeat the fake knights!

Today, once again, an explosion occurred somewhere in the city.

They called themselves a "Knighthood," but in short, they were just hoodlums. Due to various circumstances, Naga and I had decided to beat them down. By following the threads from the members whose names we knew, we had easily managed to track a few of them down.

“W-w-w-wait a minute! Wh-what do you want with me?! What grudge do you have against me?!”

“I have a grudge over sea cucumbers.”

“I have a grudge over *mozuku*.”

A lone man, having lost his path of escape, pressed his back against the wall of a back alley and cast a frightened gaze toward us. I spoke up. I stopped walking, keeping a slight distance from the man. The man we had cornered was one of those guys—though technically, he was just one of them.

“So, I’d like to ask you something.”

I pointed toward the man who had accidentally fled into a dead end.

“Would you like to be hit by the attack magic I intentionally missed earlier just as a threat? Or will you talk about the other members of the True Knights and the location of your hideout? Which will it be?”

As I spoke, Naga and I stepped forward.

...Truth be told, I had intended to hit him earlier and he just happened to dodge by luck—but let's not mention that.

Behind him was a high wall. It wasn't a height one could easily climb to escape. The sides of the path were even higher house walls. There was no escape route.

The man was a member of the True Knights who were currently causing all sorts of commotions in Velour City. Even so, the man put on a twitching smile.

“L-Light Knights? What’s that?”

I let out a deliberate, deep sigh.

“...Listen. The moment I first asked if you were a member of the True Knights, you ran for it... Why do you think playing dumb now is going to work?”

The man continued to feign ignorance. “I-I don't know what I don't know!”

“Lina, dear, what did this man just say?”

Naga asked me in a theatrical tone. I replied in kind.

“To my ears, it sounded like: ‘Please start by hitting me once in the right leg.’”

“What are you talking about, my right leg?!”

At the man’s scream, Naga asked me again, “And now?”

“He said, ‘I’d prefer a cold-based attack spell over a fire-based one.’ He’s at that age where he yearns for words like frostbite and necrosis, right?”

Ignoring the man’s tearful scream, I said, “Anyway, Naga, go ahead.”

“Hmph. Understood.”

In response, Naga began to chant a spell loud enough for him to hear.

“A-Alright! I’ll talk!”

Despite the man’s shout—Naga’s chanting did not stop.

“Then talk fast. First, give me the names of the members, all in a row.”

As I brushed him off, the man’s eyes became bloodshot. “Fine! First is Zil—”

Ba-ba-ba-bang!

A series of explosions and a flood of smoke cut off the man’s words! Of course, Naga wasn't the one who did it! The smoke enveloped the man we were supposed to have cornered. Naga stopped her chanting.

“Again—! *Gah!*”

Naga started to say something but was knocked backward and fell to the ground! She had taken a projectile to the forehead that flew from within the smoke. A similar attack came toward me, but I managed to dodge.

“Diem Wing!”

Gooo!

I chanted and released a gust of wind. The wind blew away the smoke, revealing what lay beyond.

The men were standing on top of the wall that shouldn't have been easy to climb. One was the man we had just cornered. That much was fine, but—

One was in full plate armor, a helmet, and a cape, dressed as a knight. Two were in black clothes. All three had the lower halves of their faces hidden by black cloth, making their features hard to distinguish. Where had they appeared from? How did they save the cornered man? They were none other than Zilva, the leader of the True Knights, and his two top aides!

“We meet again, girl.”

Zilva looked down at me, literally from on high, his voice laced with mockery.

“...So you’re interfering again.”

I sent a defiant smile back. Yes. Every time Naga and I moved our investigation forward and made contact with a member, these guys would appear out of nowhere and take the member away just as we had them cornered. This must have been the third or fourth time now.

I thought that after the passage of time, the way the city streets were gouged, chipped, scorched, or collapsed by attack spells would be carved into history as a beautiful page of youth—but apparently, they didn't think so. Different people have different ways of thinking and feeling. For example, the people of this city.

If we fought head-on, I was confident we would win, but they didn't seem interested in that. Whether it was because they didn't want to fight women or because they thought they would lose if they did—either way, they always just saved their comrades and fled. It was annoying beyond belief.

“It is time for you to give up chasing us. Well then, for today—”

“Vibration Ball!”

The moment Zilva began his parting greeting, Naga sat up and unleashed an attack spell! Had she been pretending to be unconscious while chanting, waiting for a gap in his guard?! But since she fired it from an unstable position, her aim was way off, Naga-san!

Gobaang!

By the time the blast shattered a completely unrelated house wall, Zilva and the others had already vanished from the top of the wall.

“No. I’d really appreciate it if you would stop.”

The one who said this after visiting the inn where Naga and I were staying and finishing introductions was the Knight Commander, Carozzo-san. He was not a fake knight, of course, but a high-ranking official of the Rudin Knighthood stationed in Velour City. Though he wasn't wearing a helmet, he was dressed in armor with a sword. The deer crest carved on his breastplate was made of gold, which felt very "Commander-like."

There are things that shouldn't be heard by ordinary people. We were talking inside the room I had taken. Naga and I sat side-by-side on the bed, while the Knight

Commander leaned his back against the opposite wall. Two accompanying knights had come to the inn with the Commander, but they had stepped out at his request.

“But look.” He seemed to be about thirty. He had a square face and a black beard. He probably looked scary when angry, but right now his face was sunken in bewilderment. “Of course, we are aware. The fact that those fake knights are running wild is the problem in the first place. I understand your desire to do something about them. However... if buildings and various things are going to be broken, shattered, or burned every single time, then as a Knighthood, we can no longer leave you be.”

Naga flashed a defiant smile at the Commander’s words. “So, are you saying you’re picking a fight with me, Naga the White Serpent?”

At those words, which could be taken as a provocation, the Commander surprisingly waved his hands in a panic.

“No! Not at all! Even we have heard the rumors about you. Lina-dono and Naga-dono. The two of you together: Team Li-Naga.”

“Wait a minute!”

Our retorts rang out at the exact same time.

“Don’t combine our names!”

“I don’t recall ever forming a team with Lina!”

The Knight Commander backed against the wall as Naga and I stood up and pressed him.

“I... is that so? At any rate. As far as I know from the rumors, you are by no means evil people, but you aren't opponents to be taken lightly either. To be honest, I have no desire to pick a fight with you.”

I see. A Knight Commander couldn't exactly let his subordinates hear him being so timid. That’s why he had sent the accompanying knights away.

He let out a sigh.

“That said... given our position as knights, if the commotion becomes too large, we will be forced to act. I’d like you to understand that much.”

I could more or less understand the position of a knight, but—

“Listen. It’s not like we particularly want to be targeted by the official knighthood either. But in the first place, this all happened because the knighthood left the True Knights to Goldof Bankiss alone, and he hasn't been able to solve it, right? Why don’t you just take Bankiss off the case and put some other knights on it?”

At my words, the Knight Commander made a bitter face.

“...It’s true that I am entrusted with the command and personnel rights of the knighthood, but... there are various circumstances...”

“Those are *your* circumstances, aren't they?”

At Naga's dismissive remark, he looked more troubled than ever. Perhaps out of habit, he began fiddling with the scabbard ornament of his sword with his fingertips.

“Well, that’s true, but... Bankiss is skilled, but he has an oddly overdeveloped sense of responsibility, or rather, he’s stubborn. He told me: ‘I will handle my son myself. Do not interfere. If you cannot grant me that, I will quit the knighthood.’”

“Then let him quit,” I shot back.

He sighed yet again at my retort.

“In the past, Bankiss saved the Lord’s life from an assassin. Ever since, he’s been the Lord’s favorite. He’s acting a bit recklessly this time, but he’s a veteran with a good reputation and solid skills. Until now, the True Knights’ activities were basically just children’s pranks, and to be honest, he’s too valuable a man to lose over something like this.”

“I see. If you lose the Lord’s favorite over something like this, you’ll end up in the Lord's bad books yourself. The 'sorrows of middle management,' as they say.”

The Commander bit his lip in silence at Naga’s sarcasm.

...Hmm. Well, if those were the circumstances—

“'Children’s pranks,' huh...”

I gave him a cold stare.

“Oho. So that’s what you think.”

“...What are you trying to say?”

Just as I expected, the Commander asked me that in response to my meaningful tone.

“Well, I’m sure the knights who get targeted by those 'pranks' can just laugh it off. But it’s not that simple for the shops that get caught up in it. They can’t do business for the rest of the day. And when customers start worrying that another incident might happen, they stop coming. It’s more than a nuisance; it’s a huge loss. I’ll be blunt. From the perspective of the people in this city, the fact that you’re leaving those fake knights alone means one thing.”

I looked him straight in the eye and said it flatly.

“The knighthood is simply incompetent.”

“Mu...!”

His face turned red with anger at my unvarnished words. I followed up immediately.

“I have a great idea for you to clear your name, though—don't you want to hear it?”

I gave him a sly grin.

The following day.

Hundreds of challenge letters from me and Naga, addressed to the True Knights, were posted all over Velour City.

The sea breeze brushed against my cheeks. Although it was a sandy beach, it wasn't the kind of place that would be bustling as a swimming area. Large and small rocks were scattered everywhere; it felt more like a rocky shore where sand had happened to accumulate over time.

There was no sign of anyone yet on this small beach, a short distance from the harbor. Naga and I were crouched there, keeping ourselves hidden.

“...Lina, are you sure they’re really coming? Those guys?”

Naga asked in a low voice, and I replied just as quietly.

“They should be. You saw that summons—I mean, that challenge letter. Do you think those guys can ignore that?”

“I don’t think so... but the appointed time is about to pass.”

“...Hmm...”

Naga was right. The location specified in the challenge was here. The time was noon today. However, the midday sun was already starting to pass its zenith.

“That might be true, but...”

I whispered, half-convinced myself.

“The opponents are a bunch of disorganized hoodlums, and there’s more than twenty of them. With that many people, there’s bound to be one or two who oversleep or misunderstand the meeting time. It’ll probably be a little while longer before they all gather here.”

“Was that poster a lie after all?”

“I came here thinking it was a duel!”

“Give me a break...”

The man’s voice echoed in the sea breeze, cutting off Naga’s grumbling. They’d finally arrived!

Through the peephole in the fake rock we were hiding in, our field of vision wasn't very wide. A group of men had appeared within it. We had eaten an early lunch and had been waiting here the whole time...

“—Look at that, there’s nobody here.”

The men loitered around, kicking at the sand and spitting. Zilva, the leader of the True Knights, was nowhere among them. At the same time I was knitting my brows—

“Being stuck here in the middle of the day in a place with the sea breeze blowing...!”

Naga let out an idiotic laugh as she tore open the fake rock from the inside!

Ah! Hey!

Before I had time to stop her, Naga pointed a finger sharply at the men who were now frozen on the beach!

“You’ve come, True Knights!”

“Naga, those are just onlookers.”

“What?!”

At my words, Naga turned around and realized. There were small groups of onlookers gathered at a distance around the beach—one here, one there. Altogether, maybe several dozen people. They were onlookers who had seen the poster and were waiting expectantly for the trouble to start.

“That is correct!”

A voice replied, and the rocks lying around the area suddenly shattered apart as men appeared one after another from within them!

I scratched my head.

“...I mean, Naga. The plan was to hide and launch a surprise attack, so what are you doing just walking out there all grandly...?”

“Hmph! Your height, your chest, and your words are all small, Lina!”

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?!”

I glared at Naga’s excuse-slash-insult.

“To call someone out only to launch a surprise attack! I see, a move perfectly suited for women and children!”

The voice came from nowhere. It didn't belong to the onlookers on the beach. They were also looking around frantically.

“Zilva!”

The voice I heard was one I recognized. It seemed the True Knights had already arrived at the beach and were just waiting for us to lose our patience.

Zilva and the members of the True Knights! Aside from Zilva, they were all in black. That was likely their uniform. As usual, they all had half their faces hidden with cloth. Seeing them, the onlookers hurriedly fled from the beach.

“Wait a minute! For someone saying that, you guys were clearly planning a surprise attack yourselves! Admit it!”

Zilva replied grandly to my accusation.

“We have been waiting right here, pretending to be rocks, since last night!”

“LAST NIGHT?!”

Naga and I spoke in unison. Naga knitted her brows.

“Wait, if that’s the case, you didn't notice us hiding in the fake rock before noon today?”

“A knight does not engage in such sneaky behavior as peeping! Therefore, I did not make anything like a peephole in the first place!”

...He just forgot to make one... I’m sure of it.

“Well, anyway.”

I spoke flatly in return. “You were planning to launch a surprise attack, weren't you?”

“You’re persistent! I wasn't!”

“A knight must speak the truth.”

“...Actually, I was planning to launch a surprise attack.”

Zilva admitted it quite honestly.

“Your thinking is shallow! It’s true that at first glance, this seems to contradict the code that a knight should be fair and square, but if you challenge them to a fight only after the opponent has been sufficiently weakened, there is no problem!”

“YES THERE IS!”

He scoffed at my shout.

“Hmph. Talking to a woman who doesn't even understand the meaning of chivalry is a waste of time. At any rate! I have certainly received the summons... no, the challenge letter from you!”

With that, he pulled a piece of paper from his back and held it out toward us! It was, of course, one of the challenge letters I had posted. Naga and I looked at each other.

“...Because...”

“...Hey...”

Both of us snorted at the same time and burst out laughing.

“Usually, you can only get away with that sort of thing until you’re about eight years old, right?”

“YOU!”

Zilva shrieked. The other men in black remained silent, but their eyes were sharp with anger. What was written there was—

> **The True Knights are gross.**
>
> If you have any objections, come to the sandy beach east of the harbor tomorrow at noon.

Oh boy. The blood was really rushing to their heads.

Zilva drew his sword with a *shing!* and pointed the tip at us.

“The code says a knight must not harm women and children! HOWEVER! For those who challenge us with a firm will, that custom does not apply! Therefore! I accept your challenge! Since you stand in our way, there is nothing left but annihilation! GO!”

“OHHH!”

The men in black raised a war cry all at once and drew their swords! Perhaps due to budget issues, some of them only had shabby knives instead of swords! They all rushed straight at us like idiots—

“Diem Wing.”

Bugoh!

“Gwah! The sand!”

“My eyes! My eyes!”

With a single gust-of-wind spell from me, their eyes were filled with sand, and most of them were immediately rendered unable to fight.

...These guys really didn't think this through at all... At the point where a sorceress called sword-users out to a sandy beach, I would have hoped they could predict at least this much. Zilva and his two aides seemed to have managed to dodge it, though.

“Huh-huh-huh-huh! Pathetic, Zilva! You claim to be a knighthood, but in the end, you can’t even overcome a sorceress's petty trick!”

The mocking voice that rang through the sea breeze was, of course, neither mine nor Naga's. This came from even further behind the True Knights. Another rock shattered with a *crack!* and someone appeared from within.

“Protecting the peace of the city is the duty of our Knighthood! I shall not permit such a display of private feuding!”

The man who appeared from the shattered rock was an elderly man in full plate armor, wielding a longsword.

“Bankiss!!”

“That’s him?”

I couldn't help but cry out. Goldof Bankiss. The official knight entrusted with cracking down on the True Knights. And Zilva’s biological father. As I expected, he had seen that challenge letter and come to this spot.

Naga questioned me. I had mentioned him to her, of course, but now that I thought about it, this was likely the first time they had met face-to-face.

I gave a small nod.

“That’s the one. He might try to interfere, so stay on your guard.”

“You are the ones doing the interfering!”

For someone his age, his ears were surprisingly sharp; having overheard my comment, Bankiss raised his raspy voice.

“—Listen, the only reason we had to move in the first place is because you couldn’t keep the peace! If you’re going to talk about what you will or won’t ‘permit,’ then how about you actually do your job and protect the peace?!”

“You need not tell me!”

Roaring, he turned back toward his son. Father and son locked eyes, sparks flying between them.

“Zilva! It seems the time has come for you to atone for your many mistakes!”

“Laughable! What meaning is there in a knighthood that wallows in the comforts of being lapdogs!”

“Here I come, Zilvaaaaa!”

The two of them drew their swords, gave a shout, and kicked up the sand as they rushed toward each other—

“That is enough!”

A sonorous, commanding shout brought their movements to a dead stop.

“That voice?!”

At the same moment Bankiss shouted and his face changed color—

“Ooooooh!”

Bang-bang-ba-gan-bang!

The rocks in the area shattered one after another yet again, and from within them emerged knights in suits of armor and helmets!

“Wh-what?!”

At Zilva’s cry of astonishment—

“It is obvious!”

Emblazoned on the breastplates of the armor was a deer crest. These were the members of the official knighthood, the Rudin Knighthood! Stunned by this sudden appearance, the fake knights began to lose their nerve. The True Knights were now completely surrounded.

The one who had spoken was Commander Carozzo of the Rudin Knighthood. He stood tall before them.

“By the name of the Rudin Knighthood, it was only natural that we should come to crack down on the True Knights, whose recent actions have become intolerable!”

“P-please wait, Knight Commander!” Bankiss cried out in confusion. “The agreement is different! You said you would leave this matter to me—”

“I shall not interfere in the matter of your son! I shall not break that promise! Now then—”

Correcting himself, the Knight Commander turned toward the True Knights—or rather, toward Zilva—and held up a single document he had pulled from his tunic.

“Zilva Bankiss! As of this very moment, I appoint you as an official knight of our Rudin Knighthood!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

Cries of shock erupted from all around. Overpowering the relentless buzzing of the crowd, the Knight Commander spoke clearly.

“Furthermore, I appoint Goldof Bankiss as his instructor! Goldof! Carry out the duty of educating and guiding your son with full responsibility!! —As promised, I shall not lay a hand on the matter of your son. I shall, however, lay down the law.”

Bankiss stood there with his mouth hanging wide open, not knowing how or what to even say in rebuttal.

“...I... I will never be a lapdog...!”

To Zilva, who raised his voice in protest even as he wavered, the Knight Commander flashed a smile.

“But nothing will change with the way you are doing things now! If you claim the current state of the Knighthood is unsatisfactory, then instead of being a dog barking

outside the fence, refuse to be a lapdog, refuse the system, and change it from within! Show me that you can live as a knight regardless!”

“...Ugh...!”

Even from the side, I could tell Zilva’s heart was wavering at that somewhat cool speech. This was it—the plan I had whispered into the Knight Commander’s ear. I called it: *Operation Zilva's Golden Cage!*

When I had heard the Commander held the power of personnel management, I thought of this trick. This Zilva guy might have a questionable head, but his skills weren't bad. If they could successfully reel him in, there was a chance he could be a plus for the official knighthood. And this plan held one more meaning.

“This is a formal order! A knight must obey orders!”

When the Knight Commander said that, Zilva fell into a troubled silence. Taking that as affirmation, the members of the True Knights began to stir and grow noisy.

“W-wait a minute! Zilva-san, what is the meaning of this?!”

“Wait, you’re becoming a knight through your father’s connections?!”

“You aren't actually thinking of accepting this, are you?!”

Before Zilva could open his mouth to answer them, the Commander spoke up.

“Now that the treatment of the two knights has been decided!”

He spoke as if Zilva’s entry into the Knighthood was already a done deal—in reality, Zilva was just too confused by the sudden news to say anything—and the Commander raised his voice, looking around at everyone.

“Next is the treatment of you lot, the True Knights! If you intend to carry on Zilva Bankiss's will and continue your activities even after he is gone, we of the Knighthood will have to deliver a severe judgment! However! If you take this opportunity to leave the True Knights, we shall overlook your crimes!”

This was the true aim of recruiting Zilva as an official knight. Specifically: pull out the core that was Zilva, and the group would fall apart. It was obvious, but the other members hadn't been doing this because they resonated with Zilva’s mistaken ideals.

Simply put, they just wanted to hop on Zilva's bandwagon and have some fun playing at being "tough."

That was why pulling Zilva out in a way that looked like "parental connections" would suck the enthusiasm right out of them. And sure enough—the True Knights crumbled with pathetic ease.

“Any who wish to leave the group, remove the cloth from your mouths right now and show your faces! I shall interpret those who do not show their faces as intending to remain in the group! Well, what is it to be?!”

At the call, the group looked at each other in silence.

“...Well, if Zilva’s leaving, then...”

One man muttered and removed the cloth covering his mouth—and it was fast after that.

“Man, forget this.”

“I’m done.”

“Somehow, the fun’s just gone out of it.”

Muttering to themselves, they removed their cloths one after another. It didn't take long for everyone to expose their faces.

Well, even if they stayed like this, they might gather again once the heat died down and do something else. The Knight Commander nodded magnanimously and began to back away slowly along with his accompanying knights.

“I deem everyone resigned! Therefore, I hereby declare the complete dissolution of the True Knights!”

I took that word as the signal—

“Fireball!”

“Diem Wing!”

Zun-ba-bogo-on!

The spells unleashed by me and Naga blew away the former members of the True Knights and the Bankiss father-son duo! —Ah, that felt refreshing.

Everyone fell, covered in sand.

“...Th-that’s not... what we agreed...”

Perhaps he was still conscious, as one of the former members muttered while twitching on the ground.

“...You said... you’d overlook...”

As he muttered that nearly passed out speech, the Knight Commander replied with a deadpan face.

“No. As promised, we of the Knighthood shall overlook your crimes.”

Naga and I followed up.

“But whether we, or the people of the shopping district you annoyed so much, will overlook it is another matter.”

“Hmph. You’d better apologize by letting them work you to the bone for free.”

“.....”

The former member fell silent, either having fainted or being left speechless. In his place, a charred lump of a man—Goldof Bankiss—leaked a mumble.

“...Why me too...?”

The Knight Commander answered with a laugh.

“This whole complicated mess started because of your mismanagement and selfishness in the first place. Just stay down quietly, Bankiss.”

“...Ugh...”

In the end, Bankiss couldn't say anything back and shut his mouth.

Thus, the "Fake Knighthood Incident" that had troubled the seaside city came to a close.

In terms of appearances, everything was settled by the Knight Commander's leadership, restoring the Knighthood’s honor. Because of that, I ultimately missed out on getting a "reward" from the people of the shopping district, but I wasn't sloppy in my dealings. I had properly received even more than that from the Knight Commander as a fee for my idea and for keeping my mouth shut.

According to rumors I heard later, it seemed a new rule was added to the Rudin Knighthood’s code: "A knight must possess the minimum common sense of a functioning member of society." ...It seems Zilva’s condition hasn't improved all that much...

(Recommendations of Chivalry: The End)

The Village of the Misshapen

There was a smell. A foul stench mixed into the lush green breeze. The further I walked along the mountain path, the stronger it became. I pulled out a handkerchief and held it to my mouth, but the smell still wouldn't go away.

The sound of insects. The sound of birds. The sound of the wind rustling the leaves. The sound of my own footsteps pushing through the brush. As I continued walking—I eventually came to a stop.

It was a mountain path surrounded by dense vegetation. Beside it, something large lay tumbled in the overgrown weeds.

The carcass of a beast. It was likely a wild boar or something similar. It was the kind of sight that made me want to avert my eyes and just walk away, but I couldn't do that. After all, finding out who did this and exterminating them—that was the job I had been hired for.

In this world, there exists an absolute law: when a mysterious incident occurs and the village’s strongest warriors go to investigate, there is a high probability they will never return.

It seemed that I was the one who happened to show up in their stead.

In a small mountain village named Sumpa. I had visited hoping to eat the local specialty mushrooms I’d heard rumors about in a nearby town, but what awaited me—

Was the heartless answer that there were none left.

The villagers claimed that while the mushrooms were a local specialty, the taste was ordinary—not quite enough to draw tourists from afar.

Actually, if I were strictly looking for food, I could have headed to a nearby large city to eat delicious seafood. But even so, being told there are "none" only makes a person want to eat them more; such is human nature. When I asked about the circumstances, I was told a story about some kind of monster appearing in the mountains.

Apparently, it was roaming around killing mountain animals indiscriminately. While no villagers had been harmed yet, the locals were unable to enter the mountains because of it.

What on earth was doing this, and for what purpose?

Animal carcasses were found, but because no one had seen the perpetrator, even its true identity remained a mystery. They had pleaded with the nearby town for help, but so far, there had been no response.

...Wait.

A distant animal’s death cry echoed through the mountains!

—Over there?!

I made a deal with the village elder, accepted the request to investigate and exterminate the monster, and that was how I found myself in the mountains now. Examining the boar’s carcass, I saw a mark where the torso had been struck by a single blow.

It wasn't a cut. It was long and thin... perhaps a horn or something similar? Judging by the state of the corpse, it had only been a few days since it was killed.

It would have been faster if there were footprints of whatever killed the boar, but the lushly growing weeds had long since erased any such traces.

I continued further along the mountain path—

...I see. This... I could understand why the villagers were frightened.

It wasn't just the boar from earlier that had been killed. One here, one there. Wolves, foxes, owls... carcasses of various animals lay scattered about.

Judging by the wounds, they were likely all killed by the same opponent as the first boar. The stench was getting increasingly pungent, and I was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

I determined the direction, chanted a spell under my breath—

“Raywing!”

I soared into the sky with the high-speed flight spell! I rose above the treetops, rushed toward the source of the sound, and headed back toward the ground at an appropriate spot.

The moment I canceled the spell and stepped onto the earth!

The murderous intent returned!

I whirled around on my heel as I pulled back—

And there, before my eyes, was light.

The thrusting silver brilliantly scattered the sunlight filtering through the trees. A long two-handed sword. Though, to be precise, I wondered if one should even call something without an edge a "sword."

The person holding it was an armored man. He looked to be a little over twenty.

On the chest of the armor was a deer emblem.

“You... no, you are...!”

The person across from me was the one who muttered. I recognized that face.

As the man stopped in a daze, his expression one of shock, another shadow appeared from behind him. This one also looked at me and froze.

“Why are you in a place like this, Miss Inverse?”

The old knight of the Rudin Knighthood, Goldof Bankiss, addressed that question to me.

A short while ago, in Velour City where I had stopped, a group of youths calling themselves the "True Knights" had been causing a massive nuisance to the townspeople with their daily, nonsensical pranks. I had gotten involved in that affair. In the end, through various events, the leader of the fake knights, Zilva, became an official knight, and his father, Goldof Bankiss, ended up as his instructor.

The two people currently before my eyes were those very two!

Recognizing me, Zilva lowered the sword he had been leveling, and I allowed the tension to leave my shoulders.

Goldof asked why I was here, but—

“That’s my line. I know Zilva joined the Knighthood and you were put in charge of his education, but why are you here?”

“Indeed!”

Goldof drew his sword for no apparent reason and pointed the tip toward the heavens.

“We are here now! Education means training! Training means mountain seclusion!”

“...Well... I don't really mind, but as for me—”

“I see. So that’s it.”

I started to speak, but then it suddenly hit me. Training. And a sword without an edge. Could it be—

“Um! By any chance, are you guys the ones killing all the animals in this mountain?!”

At my question, Zilva held up his sword.

“‘Killing all of them’ is a nasty way to put it! Call it a part of our training! To respond to the movements of fast-moving animals with a blunt greatsword! When this is perfectly achieved, his skill will be unrivaled!”

I knew it!

“No. Even if you tell me that...”

“Hmph. Then...”

Goldof groaned for a moment, then eventually clapped his hands together.

“First, regarding the villagers being anxious because they don't know who we are, that anxiety should be wiped away if you tell them that knights are training here. They will understand that no harm will come to humans. However.”

Goldof nodded grandly.

“That is a problem. As knights, we cannot simply abandon our training halfway through.”

Initially, there had apparently been talk of letting the village's strongest men go investigate—but that plan was naturally rejected. If there was some incomprehensible monster in the mountains, the villagers were terrified they wouldn't come back.

So they had asked me, the one who happened to arrive, to confirm the identity of whatever was killing the animals and stop it.

The marks left by a horn-like object—those were actually wounds caused by a single sweep of a blunt greatsword.

"Well, yeah."

"As for not killing animals needlessly, it's true that if we continue this, the village hunters will be out of a job. Therefore, we shall simply continue our training against animals that hunters do not target."

"...Is... that so...?"

As I tilted my head, Goldof gave a broad smile.

"Exactly! With that, the problem is entirely solved. That was an easy job, Miss Inverse."

—An easy job.

That pleasant sounding phrase instantly washed away whatever was bothering my heart.

"I see. In that case, no problem."

I nodded with a wide smile of my own.

And thus, the request was successfully completed.

The Village of the Misshapen

"Like hell it is!"

That was the answer that came instantly from my client, the village elder, after I explained the situation.

We were in the elder's house, located roughly in the center of the village. It was a modest but well-maintained room, likely used as a living room under normal circumstances. I sat across the table from him.

The elder was in his sixties and quite small in stature. He had a white beard, and the hair on his head was a critically endangered species. If he stayed quiet, he looked like a kind old grandpa, but right now his eyes were dyed with the color of an ill-tempered rage.

“'But' nothing!”

“Well. But—”

“I understand that it isn't some unidentified monster in the mountains. However! There is no logic in saying it’s okay to kill as many animals as you want just because hunters don't target them! For instance, if you keep killing birds and animals that eat pests, just watch what happens. The pests will multiply and cause massive damage to our crops. If food becomes scarce in the mountains, carnivorous beasts might come to the village and attack our livestock! And first of all! We can't have them just leaving animal carcasses lying around everywhere without cleaning them up! Or are you going to take care of all those problems for us?! Well?!”

“...Mu... mu-yu...!”

Being cornered by his tiny frame and intense pressure, I was actually at a loss for words. Well, certainly... if I thought about it calmly, the elder was right...

But when the Bankiss duo explained their side, I had thought, "If the elder accepts this, it'll be nice and easy." Who could blame a maiden’s heart for thinking that?!

Regardless, since he didn't accept it, I had no choice. I spoke hesitantly to the elder.

“...If that’s the case, well, I’ll go and try to talk to them one more time... though I don't know if they're the type of people who can be reasoned with...”

The elder muttered grumpily.

“Naturally, I’m going to have you go negotiate one more time. But this time, I’m sending people from our side along with you. If it’s just you, you might get sweet-talked into something stupid again. Besides, now that we know who they are, the jinx about 'the strongest men not coming back' is gone. —Rayleigh!”

At the elder's call, a door to the side opened, and a single woman appeared. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen. Her black hair was cut at her shoulders, and she wore very modest, ordinary clothes.

"I am here."

The elder looked at me.

"Let me introduce her, Lina-san. This is my granddaughter, Rayleigh. I'm sending her with you; I assume you have no objections."

Naturally, I was in no position to complain.

"...I have none."

The elder nodded with satisfaction at my answer, then turned his gaze to her—to Rayleigh.

"You heard what we said, Rayleigh. I'm sorry, but follow this Lina-san and go persuade those fools who are ravaging the mountains. That's right. You should take those three with you."

At the elder's final words, Rayleigh's complexion changed.

"P... please wait, Grandfather! That is too dangerous!"

Dangerous? I knitted my brows, not understanding the meaning, but the elder ignored me and spoke in a heavy tone.

"It does not matter. Indeed, if they are unleashed, they might bring disaster upon this village. But what kind of elder would I be if I could not use them?"

A moment of silence followed his declaration. A single bead of sweat formed on Rayleigh's forehead and crawled down her cheek.

"...I understand. If you go that far. Then let us be off immediately—let's go, Lina-san."

She turned on her heel without waiting for my answer. I left a brief greeting for the elder and followed after Rayleigh. Remaining silent, she took a lamp from the kitchen, lit it, and headed to the underground cellar. Moving aside some boxes and jars, she revealed a hidden door which led to a staircase going even further down.

I followed her as she stepped inside as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I felt the sensation of rugged stone beneath my soles. The stone walls were wet with seeping water, reflecting the lamplight with an eerie shimmer. The stagnant air was simply cold.

“...Um, what exactly is this place...?”

To my question, she didn't even turn around as she led the way.

“Grandfather said it, didn't he? That I should take 'three' with me. Those three are sealed ahead of here.”

“Sealed?”

I couldn't laugh off the exaggerated phrasing because I had noticed it. Her voice was trembling slightly.

“They are among the most elite practitioners even in this village of Sumpa. But perhaps because of that, they became intoxicated by their own power and often acted on their own. Thus, they are those who received the sentence of sealing from Grandfather—”

Her feet stopped there.

At the end of the leveled ground was a rusted iron door, catching the flickering lamplight. Its surface was bound by many layers of chains.

“...What... is this...?”

“I believe I told you it was a seal.”

She approached the door and, with a key she produced, began unlocking the padlocks connecting the chains one by one. Eventually, the chains fell to the ground with a clatter—

Gulp.

The sound of Rayleigh swallowing. Her trembling hand gripped the rusted handle—

With a creak, the door opened. Beyond was nothing but pure darkness.

Geeeeee-gigi-gigi-gigi-giiiii

From within that space of unknown size, cold air drifted out, and then—three voices that seemed to crawl along the ground.

“It opened.”

“It’s open.”

“At last.”

“It has been a long time.” “It was long.” “How long were we sealed?” “Who knows.” “I have forgotten even that.” “At any rate, it is open.”

The three repeating voices were colored with a sticky sort of joy. Rayleigh spoke toward the darkness.

“Claude! Aksa! Marbal!”

Those were likely their names. The whispering of the darkness ceased. But they must have noticed. That the voice calling their names was trembling slightly.

“It is an order from Grandfather—no, from the village elder! You are to accompany us to the mountain and persuade the two knights who have taken up residence there!”

A split second of silence. And then.

Hih-hah-hah-hah-hah-hyah-hyah-ke-ke-ke-ke-ke-ke-ke.

A bizarre layering of laughter.

“Relying on us, are you?” “It seems you are in quite a bind.” “Fine. If we can go outside because of it.” “Indeed.” “I’m in on that deal.” “We shall lend you our strength.”

“...Then, please follow me.”

Rayleigh turned on her heel.

“Let’s go, Lina-san.”

“...Hey. Can I point out a few things about all this?”

“No.”

Reluctantly, I turned on my heel and began climbing the stairs we had come down. Behind me, Rayleigh’s footsteps were joined by several more—

“Just one thing, let me point out just one thing.” “No.” “Just that part—” “No.”

It was my mistake for even asking if I could point anything out. I glanced back over my shoulder, but in the narrow, dark staircase, I couldn't see the men who were supposed to be behind Rayleigh.

And so. Carrying many doubts, I headed toward the mountain once again.

The mountain was the same as before, a mixture of the smell of grass and the stench of rot. Pushing through the tall weeds, Rayleigh and I searched through the greenery for the Bankiss duo.

By the way, those three were supposed to be around here somewhere.

I said "supposed to"—and for good reason. I could sense them, but I couldn't see them. As soon as we had left the elder’s house, there was a movement behind us, and when I turned around, the three of them were already gone. There was only the lingering sensation of someone lurking nearby.

They stayed like that, never attempting to draw any closer. It was obvious they were being cautious.

I couldn't see Zilva either, nor could I hear the footsteps or the clanking armor of Goldof’s approach. Most likely, they had heard our voices a while ago and had split up to lie in wait.

“What is your business?”

Goldof’s voice rang out.

“Ah. Well. It’s about the training in these mountains. The villagers weren't satisfied with those conditions you set. So, I’ve come to talk things over one more time.”

“It doesn't feel much like a ‘talk’ to me.”

Goldof spoke flatly. He was likely sensing the presence of the three hidden figures. Although those three hadn't shown themselves, they weren't exactly trying to hide their presence either. They were probably trying to put pressure on the Bankiss duo.

I continued to call out and move forward. Move forward and call out. I lost track of how many times I repeated the process.

“Hey! I’m here!”

“I can hear you.”

The voice came suddenly from nearby. I looked over to see a single armored figure standing silently in the depths of a thicket a short distance away.

“Whoa. There you were.”

However, despite my casual words, Goldof Bankiss kept a serious gaze fixed on us.

“It doesn't matter whether the animals are targeted by hunters or not. Even if there is a justification for your training, if you kill animals left and right, the balance of the mountain itself will be destroyed. Please leave immediately.”

Rayleigh spoke decisively, ignoring Goldof’s previous points.

“I cannot do that.”

Goldof replied instantly.

“As a knight, I cannot simply interrupt the special training I have begun and go home in shame.”

He was completely blunt.

“So—you won't listen?”

“That is what I am saying.”

Their gazes locked, sparks flying—and then, Rayleigh gave a small, faint smile.

“...I see. Now I understand why Grandfather told me to take those three along...”

She muttered to herself, then turned back to Goldof.

“In that case! We shall assist you in your training! We have prepared opponents for you who are far more formidable than mere beasts! They are among the most elite practitioners of our Sumpa village!”

“The village of Sumpa, you say?”

A hint of astonishment colored Goldof’s voice. Ignoring him, Rayleigh’s voice rang out!

“Go! Claude! Aksa! Marbal!”

Three laughs overlapped and echoed in response to her call! The forest wind took on a sudden chill, and birds took flight from the treetops.

“Very well, Sir Knight.” “We shall be your opponents.” “We look forward to it.”

The three voices descended from the depths of the forest. Goldof, deep in the thicket, glared resolutely into the void.

“I have heard of you! The Sumpa Phantom Realm Three Demon Lords!”

Wait, what?! I instinctively knitted my brows at the sudden appearance of these strange names and looked at Rayleigh.

“Don't ask me anything.”

She threw the words over her shoulder without even looking at me.

“This is strictly to assist in your training! However, as we are but ordinary villagers, do not expect us to hold back! If you should be defeated by mere villagers, you must admit your immaturity as a knight and leave! NOW GO!”

A shadow leaped from the treetops toward Zilva with a *whoosh!*

In an instant, Zilva kicked off the ground! He closed the distance with one of the shadows, swinging his blunt sword before the opponent could even land!

It was a range from which the shadow couldn't possibly dodge! But!

The shadow fluttered just before the strike, evaded the tip of the blade, and landed on the ground!

“Hoh.”

It muttered, turning its face toward Zilva.

“Not a bad judgment. But I shall make you regret making your first move against me, Marbal.”

The figure was of medium build with black hair. He wore tattered clothes that must have been white once, but over the years had decayed to the color of sand. On his back were black wings. His skin was shriveled, and where his eyes should have been, there were only black, empty sockets.

“Wait! Hey! Rayleigh! What is that?!”

I asked in a panic, but she didn't even meet my eyes as she cut me off.

“They are the village's strongest warriors.”

...I don't think "strongest warriors" usually have wings and empty eye sockets.

“Since the opponent is not running away, the training only has meaning if I fight them head-on and win! There is no point in training if I win by a surprise attack!”

At Zilva’s words, the three voices replied:

“You think you can beat us with a surprise attack?!” “I like your spirit!” “Then let us be your opponents!”

“I think I’ll join in on this training as well.”

The one who stepped forward was Goldof Bankiss.

“The Sumpa Phantom Realm Three Demon Lords. Having heard that name, I cannot simply sit by and watch. I would very much like to see your skill for myself.”

Suddenly—*Goon!*

An explosion erupted behind us! The wind scattered grass, leaves, and earth, and a voice called out from behind me.

“Lina-san.”

Rayleigh grabbed my right hand as I stood watching.

“It’s dangerous here. Let’s go.”

“Dangerous? I mean, those guys—”

“Just come on.”

She pulled my hand forcefully. There was no need to force myself to stay. I could ask my questions later once we changed locations. Thinking that, I followed her without resisting.

We ran back along the mountain path we had come from, weaving through the trees—but just as I went to step down, there was no ground beneath me.

The wind was stronger than I thought! Before I could be swept away, I kicked off the ground and threw myself into the air! I managed to avoid hitting any trunks, but I ended up sliding down a gentle cliff—or perhaps a very steep slope.

Rayleigh was nowhere to be seen. I heard the sound of explosions from above several times.

I waited until things had quieted down a bit before heading back to the original spot, but no one was there. I seriously considered just going back to the village, but if I returned and told the elder I had abandoned Rayleigh, he would surely be furious.

Reluctantly, I began searching for her, and eventually, the sky took on an indigo hue as the stars began to flicker to life. Night comes quickly in the mountains once the sun begins to set.

Under the deepening sky, I walked toward a small light—

It was a single orange flame glowing in the depths of the darkening trees. I moved toward it. I heard the sound of water. It was a single mountain stream. On the stony riverbed, someone was making a campfire.

I approached slowly, keeping my guard up. I couldn't see the person at the fire from here, but—

“—Oho?”

At the voice, I stopped in my tracks. The voice belonged to one of those "Three Demon Lords." A shadow moved by the fire, its soft silhouette coming into focus. Judging by the build, it was the four-armed giant.

“Were you not with Rayleigh?”

His expression was still dissolved in the darkness. Given the situation, I wanted to believe he wasn't an enemy, but Rayleigh had called these three "dangerous." It was best not to let my guard down.

“We got separated. I got caught up in someone’s fight, you see.”

“I see.”

A moment of silence followed his answer. And then. A sudden white light illuminated the area.

The light revealed a man who looked different than before; he had the appearance of a human. While his size hadn't changed, he had two arms instead of four, his skin wasn't shriveled, and he had two functioning eyes.

“I have caused you unnecessary trouble. It seems I must apologize.”

...That was a more decent reaction than I expected.

As I slowly approached him, I realized the light was likely a manifestation of his own magical power.

“—You guys are—”

“As you can see, we are just villagers who pride ourselves on our strength.”

I ignored his impossible joke.

“You’re Liches, aren't you?”

The man’s movement stopped at my accusation. A Lich. A powerful sorcerer who trades their life for even greater magical power and immortality. With that overwhelming power, they can create light or use transformation magic without even chanting.

“But why... why are there *three* Liches in a village?”

“—A long time ago—we were sorcerers belonging to the same Association.”

“The other two as well?”

“Yes. They are Liches, just like me, Claude. ...Though we got separated while fighting those knights.”

The giant—Claude—looked up at the moon in the sky. It’s not every day you find a Lich just rolling around, let alone three of them in a tiny village like that. Claude began to tell his story.

“We researched immortality together, competing with and pushing each other’s talents. Let me be clear so there's no misunderstanding: even though we studied immortality, I swear we never did anything we couldn't show the world. However, when the Association's Council Chairman changed, the situation changed as well. A Chairman who hated immortality research drove us out, and we became wanderers. That was when we met the man who was the grandfather of the current village elder. We hit it off, worked together to clear the mountain, and built a village. That is the current Sumpa village. At first, it was just a cluster of shacks, but soon more people came, proper houses were built, and it took on the appearance of a village... but.”

He lowered his gaze to the flickering flames.

“On the day of the very first village festival... all three of us became Liches at the exact same time.”

“What happened? That night?”

I realized I had walked right up to the fire. When I stopped and asked, he spoke with a look of deep regret.

“That night, we got carried away, got drunk, and talked about our dreams for the future. My memory is a bit fuzzy now... but someone said they would become a king, someone said they would become the world's greatest sorcerer, and someone said they would become a billionaire.”

He continued.

“Someone else said, ‘Then I’ll be richer than you,’ and from there it was just drunken bickering. ‘I’ll be richer.’ ‘No, *I’ll* be richer.’ We had been drinking, and since we were close friends, we got strangely stubborn. So Aksa, Marbal, and I each went back to our own homes for a moment... and turned ourselves into undead sorcerers.”

...Wait... does that mean...

“—No way—”

I noticed my own voice was trembling.

“Yes. We—” Claude clenched his fists on his knees so hard they shook.

“We bet it all on the pun between ‘Rich’ and ‘Lich’!”[1]

“YOU DID IT FOR A PUN?!”

He gave a slow nod.

“We said, ‘Look, look, now I’m a Lich!’ ...Even if we were drunk... what a foolish thing we did...”

You really *are* fools.

“I thought it would get a laugh, but everyone just backed away.”

“...Well, yeah, I imagine they would.”

Claude’s shoulders shook slightly, perhaps remembering that moment.

“And since all three of us did it at the same time, laughing was out of the question. People didn't even react with fear; it was more like, ‘Oh... you guys too? Fine,’ and they just ignored us. A life-risking gag with absolutely no reaction...”

“That... that sounds painful... in every possible way...”

“Do you understand...?”

Of course, I couldn't truly feel his pain, but it wasn't hard to imagine. The people they knew grew old and passed away one after another. In the midst of that, they couldn't even die; they had spent a vast amount of time being known as the people who became immortal for a lame pun. Even if they occasionally said something funny, the reaction was always, "That's funny for a Lich," or "You've got some nerve being funny for a Lich"—

I understood his pain. What a profound humiliation it was. When you find yourself in such a state, the pleasures left to you in life become quite limited...

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[1] R and l are the same in japanese so Rich sounds like Lich both are loan words so the english pun works in both languages.

“Ever since, we have remained in the village,” Claude said. “If only one of us had become a Lich, perhaps our heart would have twisted and we would have turned to evil. But because the three of us were together, we never strayed from the path, and we get along well with the villagers. ...Though, if there is one drawback, it's that no matter what joke we tell, everyone says it’s 'chillingly' bad.”

“I see...”

I was about to accept his story—but then, I remembered something.

“But if you get along so well with the villagers, why were you sealed in that basement? And Rayleigh said you were dangerous, and even the knights knew about you.”

“We have driven off bandits and monsters many times. That is likely why our names are known in the nearby city. As for the sealing—or rather, the confinement—in the basement... well...”

His expression clouded slightly.

“...This body, you see. It is fine without eating or drinking. But at the same time, even if I eat or drink, I no longer find it 'tastes' good. About... how long ago was it? It’s hard to tell since we were shut in the dark, but maybe two or three days ago. Aksa, Marbal, and I went to the nearby city to gamble at bakuchi and lost big. When we tried to put it on the village’s tab, the elder flew into a total rage. Thanks to that, we were shut in the basement. It was so boring, so boring.”

“So *that* was the reason! ...In other words... the 'danger' was...”

“The danger that we might gamble in the city again and send the bill to the village, I suppose.”

It was an unbelievable story. But if it were a lie—how should I put it—one would surely try a bit harder to make a more plausible story.

If the current story was true—

I stood by the campfire and addressed Claude.

“Could you help me find Rayleigh? If we find her, it might help restore your honor a little, don't you think?”

“Hmm—I suppose so.”

He stood up slowly.

“If anything happens to Rayleigh, I’ll get a massive scolding from the elder.”

“Then, where do you think she is?”

“I don't know, but she should be closer to the village than where the explosion just was. Also, if we stand out too much, she might try to avoid us... I have a general idea of the situation from what Rayleigh and the knights said... but if she gets caught up in a fight between us and the knights—”

Before he could finish his sentence.

Don!

A sudden explosion sounded! The location wasn't far away!

“—It’s started!”

Claude stood up and made to run toward it, but I stopped him.

“Wait! During the first fight, she tried to get away from the battlefield. So now, she wouldn't be trying to get closer to the sound of an explosion.”

“Then how do you suggest we find her?”

“Hmm... if we shout, it might draw one of the Bankiss duo to us and start a fight. Come to think of it, we could use the opposite method.”

In this dark mountain after sunset, it would be faster to finish things with the knights first than to search for one person whose whereabouts were unknown.

“Let’s change the plan! We’re heading toward the explosion.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going to end the fight with the knights first! If we do it flashy enough to show 'don't come near here,' Rayleigh will likely avoid us of her own accord! Indirectly, that should ensure her safety!”

“—Understood.”

The two of us looked at each other, nodded, and ran toward the sound of the blast.

A thin breath cut through the night. In the next instant, a born light illuminated the world.

A dark forest. A man in sand-colored clothes moved through the treetops. If I recalled, his name was Marbal. Standing on the ground, confronting him with a sword, was Goldof Bankiss.

A light orb created by Marbal flew toward Goldof—

“Mun!”

With a shout of spirit, a knife thrown by Goldof intercepted the bullet of light!

Collision. Flash. And then a roar. After the light vanished, it wasn't true darkness that followed. The scattered light orb had become fragments, spreading everywhere and catching fire on dry grass and trees, sending up small tongues of flame.

Marbal and Goldof faced each other across a distance.

“...Not bad.”

At Marbal’s murmur, the corner of Goldof’s mouth curled up slightly.

“You aren't quite as formidable as the rumors say.”

“What...?!”

Anger mixed into Marbal’s voice. He thrust both hands toward Goldof, creating a sphere of light in each palm—

At that moment.

“Kuoh!”

With a sharp breath, a light orb flew in from the side, targeting Goldof! It was a strike released by Claude, who had run here with me!

But Goldof didn't show even a hint of agitation; he flashed his left hand! I wondered just how many he had; he intercepted it with a small knife!

The explosion dyed the night before vanishing.

“Claude!”

Marbal raised a voice of surprise while still holding the light in his hands.

“Do not call it cowardly, Sir Knight,” Claude called out to Goldof.

Claude created magical light and released it toward Goldof from behind! He had used transformation magic before arriving here and had already turned into the four-armed misshapen form.

“Since you accepted a three-on-two training match, you must have known such a situation was possible.”

“I was aware from the start.”

Goldof’s voice was unwavering.

“Then I shall not hold back!”

Marbal roared and released two lights! The tip of Goldof’s sword grazed the ground! The earth and twigs kicked up by the blade intercepted the light—

There, a light sphere created by Claude approached from the side! But with only a slight change in his positioning, Goldof—

Goon!

Marbal’s light orb was intercepted and exploded. The light released by Claude was blown off course by the wind generated by the blast, missing Goldof and scattering into flames deep in the forest.

At the same time, Goldof dashed across the ground! His target was Marbal! Claude also ran as if chasing after Goldof’s back!

“Ku-oh!”

Silver light approached from the side of the flinching Claude! It was a silver blade flashing. Zilva Bankiss, who had arrived at some point, was there.

Quickly, Claude leaped back—

Watching that battle from a short distance away, I realized things were getting out of hand.

“—This is getting a bit much.”

I muttered to myself.

Zilva intercepted the pebbles from Claude’s light from the side and released a sword strike. But Zilva didn't pursue Claude any further. He had noticed it. The appearance of a new shadow. Moving only his eyes, he looked over there.

To the red shadow, Aksa, standing at the edge of the forest darkness.

“So you’re all gathered again. Don't run away this time.”

At Zilva’s provocation—

“Spare me your chatter.”

Aksa created magical light.

Now, if an ordinary knight and an ordinary Lich fought, who would win? The answer was clear: the Lich. To begin with, it was impossible for a knight who couldn't use magic and didn't possess a magic sword to defeat a Lich, an undead being.

But. Goldof and Zilva were highly skilled, while Claude and his group were immature for Liches. After all, Claude and the others were the type who became Liches because of a drunken pun. Even if their magical power jumped up due to becoming a Lich, they didn't suddenly become able to use attack spells they didn't know.

The light orbs they released weren't actual spells, but merely a brute-force manifestation of a portion of their vast magical power. Furthermore, their attack patterns were monotonous. Against thugs, bandits, or monsters, that would likely be more than enough, but against the battle-hardened Goldof and his son, they were being seen through with ease.

However, on the other side, Goldof had no means of defeating Claude and his group. In other words—at this rate, the battle would never reach a conclusion.

If so, there was only one way to handle this. I chanted a spell—

“Dragon Slave!”

Gubagooooooooon!

The crimson light that could slay even a Great Dragon exploded far above everyone's heads.

As the echoes of the blast still lingered, I raised my voice toward the frozen battlefield.

"I can't stand to watch this. Seriously. Do you call this training or a battle? From where I'm standing, it only looks like you're needlessly ravaging the mountain."

Claude's face changed color, and Goldof glared at me.

"Are you mocking us?"

I faced Goldof's glare with total composure.

"Yes, I am. Actually, you're doing a terrible job. If you want to train, I'll be your opponent and teach you how a real attack-spell user fights. Or what? Do you plan to keep fighting like this forever and start a forest fire? I think the Lord and the village elder would be truly furious if that happened."

At my remark, everyone finally seemed to notice the small fires flickering around them.

"Th-that would be bad."

Claude finally spoke.

"...Even for us, it would be a disgrace to the name of knights to cause a fire during training."

Goldof also spoke with a bitter tone.

"Then, first, we extinguish the fire. I'll go around putting out the flames with magic, so Claude, Aksa, and Marbal—you three cast light spells all over to provide illumination! As for the Bankiss duo... I'll take you on later, so wait quietly until the fire is out."

I repeated this several times.

"Icicle Lance!"

My spell finally extinguished the last of the fire.

“That should be most of the fire gone,” I said, looking around.

Ice flowers were blooming everywhere between the trees, sparkling as they caught the light of the many magical lanterns created by Claude and his group.

“Yeah.” “It seems so.” “No problems on this end.”

The three Liches—Claude and the others—replied. I turned my eyes to the standing Goldof and Zilva.

“...Now then. Sorry to keep you waiting. About the training. Since I don't want to start a forest fire, I won't use fire-based spells, and I won't use any of those one-hit-kill mass destruction spells like the one I just fired into the sky. Of course, the three villagers won't interfere. They’ll just watch. I win if I can make you unable to move. I might end up giving you some injuries, but I intend to use spells that won't kill you. As for you... let’s see. Your swords should stay in their sheaths; if you land a single blow on me, you win. How’s that?”

At my proposal, Goldof looked somewhat reluctant.

“Even in their sheaths, if we strike with our strength, we might snap a woman’s or child’s bones. Are you sure about this?”

“Hmm. Let’s see... I’d be in trouble if you made excuses after losing, like ‘I accidentally held back and couldn't show my real strength.’”

“You think I will lose?!”

I casually ignored Zilva’s anger.

“Then, how about this: you use your bare hands, and if you catch me, you win. Oh, but throwing pebbles and such is fine.”

Goldof and Zilva exchanged glances.

“Fine.”

“If you’re going to talk that big, then show us. Show us how a real attack-spell user fights.”

“Then—start.”

I declared it casually, and while chanting a spell in my mouth, I turned on my heel and began to run! Goldof and Zilva dashed after me at the same time!

If it was a footrace, I had the advantage. Of course, I didn't intend to just keep running. There was a small impact behind me. Likely one of them had thrown a pebble, targeting my legs, but my mantle easily blocked it.

“Mega Brand!”

I finished the spell in my mouth and released it, spinning around over my shoulder! It was a spell that interfered with the earth spirits to blow up the soil in a certain area. If it hit an undefended opponent directly, it would deal enough damage to keep them from moving for a while—

D-o-o-on!

The Bankiss duo scattered just before the earth blew up, evading the strike. During that time, I was already running away from the two of them while chanting the next spell.

“Trying to slow us down?! Naive!”

Zilva roared and dashed across the ground as soon as the exploding soil settled—

Goshatsu.

He tripped over a tree root that hadn't been there just a moment ago and tumbled over!

The naive one was him! I knew the attack power of Mega Brand wouldn't work against someone encased in metal armor! That spell was meant to dig up the ground, expose a tree root, and trip him up! At the same time, I turned on my heel and released the spell I had chanted!

“Freeze Arrow!”

A dozen or so arrows of cold air were born and streaked straight toward Zilva! There was no way he could dodge them while he was down!

“Damn it!”

Ko-ki-i-i-i-n!

The Village of the Misshapen

The ice sewed him to the earth—that was one down!

"Oohhh!" Claude and the others let out a collective cry of admiration.

As I began the next incantation, I circled around to the side. Naturally, Goldof came charging in. I—stopped right where I was.

Being wary of my behavior, Goldof, who had been charging straight at me, shifted his movement to loop around from the left.

At that instant.

"Damp Veen!"

My release of the "Magic Wind" spell made Goldof's body stagger!

Gajagigigitsu!

Goldof tumbled into the frozen thicket—the very spot where I had extinguished the fires earlier. I followed up with another spell. Goldof managed to pick himself up, but his movements were visibly sluggish.

And now, the finish.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Goldof tried to dodge the bolts of cold I fired once more. If this had been under normal circumstances, he might have successfully evaded them. However, for Goldof, whose movements had dulled, the knight took a direct hit and his motion ground to a halt.

Just to be safe, I treated both of them to one more cold-air spell each to completely seal their movements before finishing.

"——Well, that's about that."

I spoke to the two of them.

"There were quicker ways to handle this, but... well, call it practice."

".....Ridiculous.... This... so easily...."

The breath escaping the groaning Zilva was white.

"If only... my body had been moving better...."

...It seemed this man still didn't understand the reason for his defeat. I looked at him and spoke in a dismissive tone.

"You think so? If I hadn't used cold spells during the fire-fighting, and the ambient temperature hadn't dropped, and if you guys weren't wearing metal armor—which chills the body so easily—and if you hadn't moved around helping put out fires, your bodies might not have gotten so cold, and you might have been able to move a bit better."

".....Could it be...!"

Goldof opened his eyes in shock at my words.

"From that moment already..... you intended... was the whole thing a strategy.....? To scatter cold air and dull our movements.....!"

"Pretty much."

Of course, they probably weren't wearing metal armor directly against their bare skin, but the clothes between their skin and the armor must have soaked up sweat during the previous battle. Cold air plus damp clothes—it had been more than enough.

"Cowardly....."

"Maybe."

I chose not to deny Zilva.

"But I'd like to ask: when you lose a battle and fail to fulfill your duty as a knight, is everything forgiven just because you call your opponent 'cowardly'?"

"Guh....."

"I told you at the start, didn't I? That I'd teach you how an attack-spell user fights. In other words, it's a battle of tactics and construction. If you can't read that and lose so easily, and even after losing you just blame your opponent without reflecting, you'll never grow. Seclusion training is about acknowledging your own flaws and filling them

in to grow. If you can't admit defeat or your own shortcomings, it’s not training at all. If that’s the case, it doesn't matter how long you do it—it's useless."

I supposed this wouldn't really get through to him, though.

".....I see... we have lost."

Goldof’s murmur of resignation—was it because he finally understood, or was he just trying to save face?

"Father....."

"Admit it, Zilva. No matter the reason, the fact that we were rendered helpless like this is undeniable. As we are now, no matter how much we train our bodies or polish our sword skills, the result will be the same no matter how many times we fight."

Zilva was left speechless by his father's words.

"What you guys need isn't training where you swing swords at animals, but to judge the situation around you. And that kind of thing is best cultivated in a city, by meeting various people and constantly thinking about things."

—In other words, I was indirectly telling them to read the room and get off the mountain... but I supposed I’d need to rethink the training methods themselves.

"We are leaving the mountain."

Goldof’s declaration finally signaled the end of the incident.

"Then all that’s left is to find Rayleigh."

Claude’s words reminded me that there was still one job remaining.

One commotion had somehow come to an end. After the battle was over, we spent a while walking around searching for Rayleigh, but in the end, we couldn't find her.

"Ah. Welcome back."

Returning to the village on a hunch, the group collapsed on the spot upon seeing her in the village elder’s house, eating stew.

.....Is that so..... While we were worrying that you might be injured and unable to move, you just went back to the village alone and were having a family dinner with your parents and the elder. I see.

"Why on earth are you eating stew?!"

I snapped at her, but she just blinked.

"Why.....? Because it’s dinner time?"

"That’s not what I mean!"

"Exactly! We were searching all over the mountain worrying about you!"

"Even if you say that... there was no point in me staying in the mountain like that. If I wandered around while you were in the middle of a mess and got caught up and injured, I wouldn't like it, and the person who involved me would be blamed. So I thought returning to the village and staying quiet was the best course of action."

".....Well..... I mean..... that’s true....."

Logically, she was right... but somehow, the lack of sincerity—or whatever it was—just didn't sit right with me.

"Oh. I picked the mushrooms you wanted to eat on my way down from the mountain. They’re in the stew, so please, eat as much as you like."

If she put it that way, I had no choice.

I left the knights and Liches behind and eagerly sat in an empty chair. I took a bite of the targeted mushroom from the bowl of stew I was served.

It tasted incredibly ordinary.

Foods that local people describe as "not that great" really are not that great.

"I guess I’ll help myself."

The three "Accidental Liches"—Claude and the others—would likely keep getting by with the villagers from now on. The Bankiss duo talked about returning to the city to redo their training methods. Well, knowing those two, they’ll probably do something misunderstood again and cause a commotion somewhere else.....

I learned one thing: food locals don't praise isn't worth a detour.

Thinking I’d stop by a big city to eat something normally delicious, I left the village of Sumpa behind.

(The Village of the Misshapen: End)

Afterword

Author: Roast some saury.

L: Vent the room.

Author + L: Anyway, with that said, we bring you *Slayers Special Vol. 25: The Way of the Knight!*

Author: Argh! My long-standing dilemma addressed in a single sentence!

L: You've been worrying about saury smoke for years?

Author: No, that was just a figure of speech. My point is—it's saury! It's autumn! The room is smoky! What am I supposed to do?!

L: ...Anyway, moving on. "Autumn" (Akita) reminds me of something. Who is this "Akita-chan" mentioned in the preview for the first half of *Beast of the White Night*?

Author: Oh, nobody in particular. I mean, the name could have been anything. It's just that the motif for that story was a traditional festival from Akita Prefecture.

L: Huh? That was the model? I totally thought it was based on that New Year's event... the one where they bite people.

Author: Well, while I'm trying to craft a story and messing around with various elements, it often ends up drifting pretty far from the original prototype.

L: Wait. If I recall, when you wrote that "Bacupule" (Stupid Couple) story, you said the starting point for the idea was the Nine-Tailed Fox, and even the editor tilted their head at that.

Author: (Checking...) Oh, that one. From *Special Vol. 19: Love is Strong*.

L: ...The Nine-Tailed Fox? You mean the legend about the fox from the continent that transforms into a beautiful woman to bewitch the Emperor and eventually gets exterminated? *That* story?

Author: Of course.

L: ...There's no trace of the original left! In fact, there's almost zero common ground!

Author: Well, it's like this: "A wicked woman is trying to bewitch a man"—I kept that much as it was. Then I twisted it: "...or so the client thought, but actually it wasn't like that at all." While I was writing and tweaking it further... before I knew it, it turned into that.

L: Regardless, the prototype is gone... I really think you should have saved this talk for the afterword of Volume 19.

Author: Eh. But some readers start from the afterword. If I wrote "The motif is the Nine-Tailed Fox" in the afterword and a reader saw that first, there's a possibility of spoilers...

L: There is absolutely no chance of that. Not for that story.

Author: But look, in the afterword for *that* volume, there were other things I had to write about. Like the explanation for the New Year's cards.

L: You prioritized that over explaining the actual book?! ...Wait a second. Now that I think about it, if the explanations increase, my screen time in the afterword decreases... and that would be bad. Instead of doing explanations, it's much more constructive to spend pages on "Author Eradication."

Author: ...Hello? Excuse me? You're using the word "constructive" wrong. In fact, you've decided on my eradication without even hearing my side!!

L: Well, look. At about this timing, the author usually says something rude to me and receives a fitting reward. That's how the development goes. I was just thinking: if that pattern is never going to change, it might be an option to just strike before anything is even said. You could even interpret it as a kind of self-defense.

Author: Wrong! That is not self-defense!

L: Come on, don't be like that. Let’s just give it a try for fun. Oh, I have an idea. Let's make it a "Ultimate Choice" like a game. I have a block of concrete that looks exactly like tofu, and a block of tofu with the hardness of concrete.

Author: They’re the same hardness?! I don't want either of them!

L: I see. Since you’re so honest, I’ll give you both!

Author: Gah! This is the same logic as *The Golden Axe and the Silver Axe*!

L: Speaking of which, once upon a time, I think there was a mystery riddle where someone froze something soft to bludgeon a victim, then let it melt to destroy the evidence. If you think about it that way, there’s nothing in the world that *can’t* be a murder weapon. In the next volume of *Special*, we should skip the author’s new story and instead do: *"100 Common Items You Can Use as Weapons in an Emergency,"* narrated by me.

L (cont.): For example, the hatchet that any ordinary middle or high school girl keeps close at hand. Depending on how you use it, it can become a magnificent weapon! How should one actually use it? I’ll explain those kinds of "Grandmother’s Wisdom" style life hacks one after another!

L (cont.): This will sell! (Clenches fist) Eventually, a movie adaptation?! No, just the announcement alone might bring in offers for a media mix... Okay, perfect!

Well then! The follow-up report will probably be in *Dragon Magazine* or something, so everyone look forward to it!

Afterword: End.